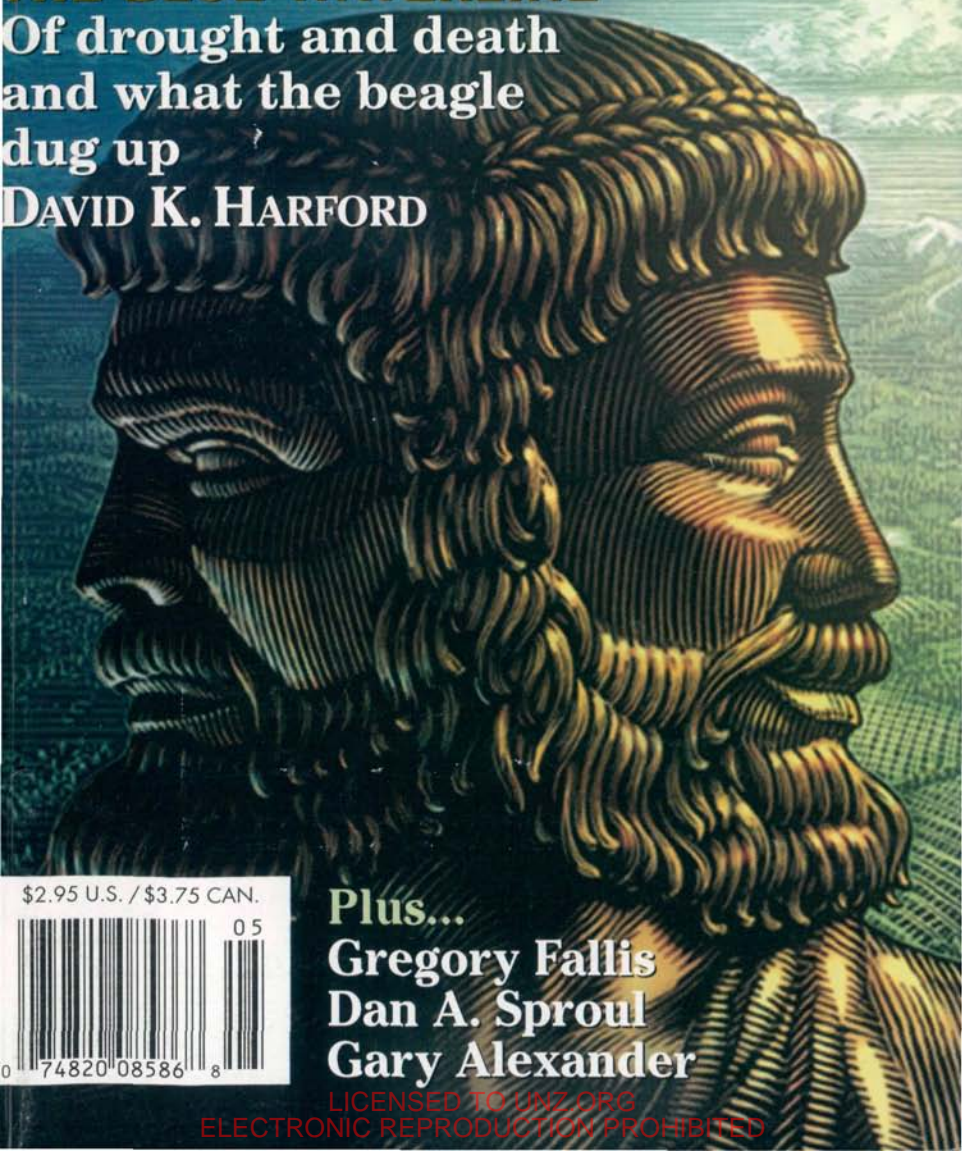


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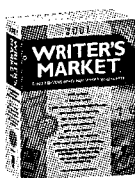
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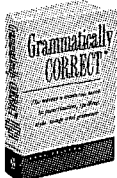
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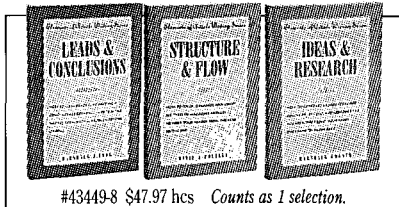
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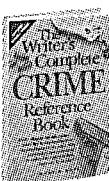
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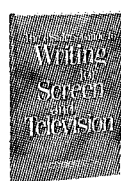
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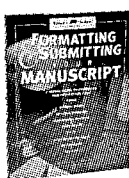
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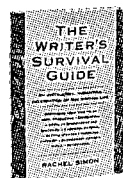
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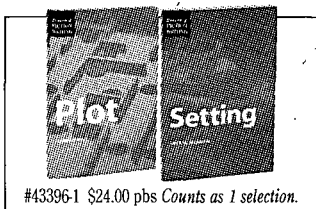
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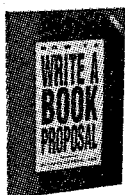
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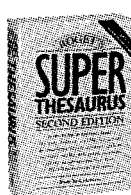
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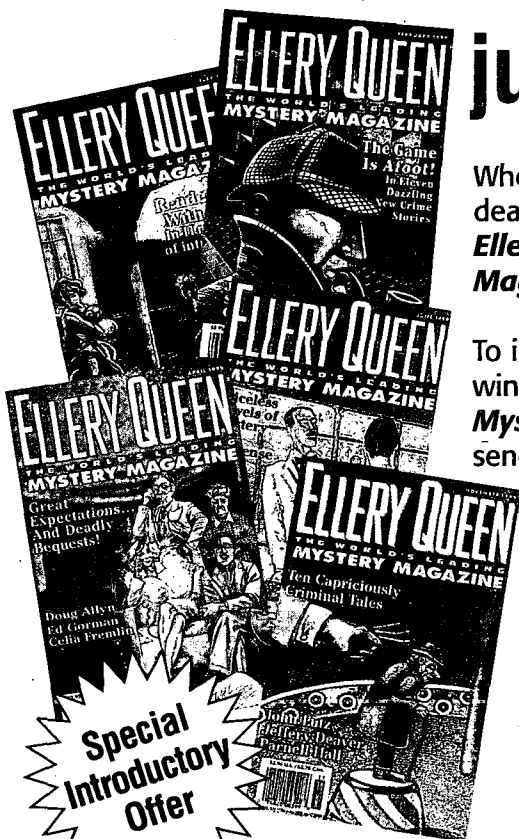
ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE (USPS:523-590, ISSN-0002-5224), Vol. 46, No. 5, May, 2001. Published monthly except for a July/August double issue by Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications. Annual subscription \$33.97 in the U.S.A. and possessions, \$41.97 elsewhere, payable in advance in U.S. funds (GST included in Canada). Subscription orders and correspondence regarding subscriptions should be sent to P.O. Box 54011, Boulder, CO 80322-4011. Or, to subscribe, call 1-800-333-3311, ext. 4000. Editorial Offices: 475 Park Avenue South, New York, NY 10016. Executive Offices: 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855. Periodical postage paid at Norwalk, CT, and additional mailing offices. Canadian postage paid at Montreal, Quebec, Canada Post International Publications Mail, Product Sales Agreement No. 260665. © 2001 by Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications, all rights reserved. The stories in this magazine are all fictitious, and any resemblance between the characters in them and actual persons is completely coincidental. Reproduction or use, in any manner, of editorial or pictorial content without express written permission is prohibited. Submissions must be accompanied by a self-addressed, stamped envelope. The Publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts. POSTMASTER: Send Change of Address to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, P.O. Box 54625, Boulder, CO 80328-4625. In Canada return to Transcontinental Sub. Dept., 525 Louis Pasteur, Boucherville, Quebec, J4B 8E7. GST #R123054108.

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EDITOR'S NOTES

Cathleen Jordan

Herein you will make the acquaintance of Beau the beagle, who owes his existence to one of our readers.

Perhaps. Or perhaps he was there all along and no one ever noticed him, or maybe it was just that no one thought to mention his name. It does seem as if he's been lying on Longstreet's shady porch or fooling around in the yard all this time.

At any rate, when he sent us "The Blue Waterline," Dave Harford, its author, said in his cover letter: "This story, by the way, has its roots in the note I got from a nine-year-old girl who reads AHMM. She wrote: Dave, could you write a story where Longstreet's beagle helps Longstreet solve the question? Hell, I didn't even know Longstreet had a beagle, but he does now."

We knew about that note because Dave had passed it along a

couple of years ago, saying that his young correspondent "first read 'Mountain Law' in AHMM, then I sent her a free cassette. Her mother told me she's about wore out the cassette. In my note to her when I sent her the cassette I drew down a picture of a beagle from the Internet and inserted it in the letter. I know her dad raises beagles and we have one. . . . So, for Samantha Mays, maybe the next Longstreet story will have his beagle unearth something—like a body."

As we go to press Dave adds, "Thanks for the idea, Samantha. This story's for you, honey."

About those cassettes—a number of Dave Harford's stories have been produced as audio cassettes by Elmtree Publishers in Vancouver. Their Web page is at www.elmtree-publish.com and the cassettes can be ordered there. Or you can go to Dave's Web page at www.harford-mystery.com.

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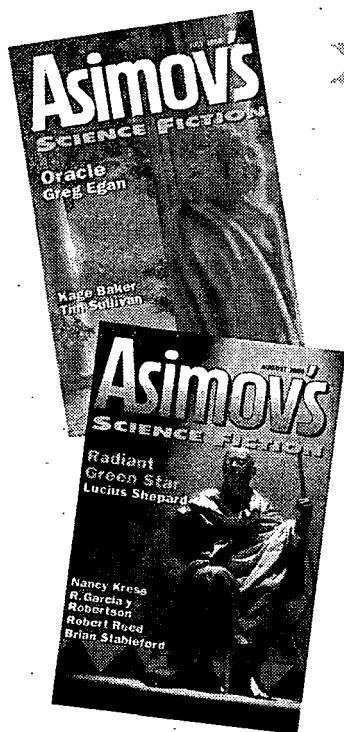
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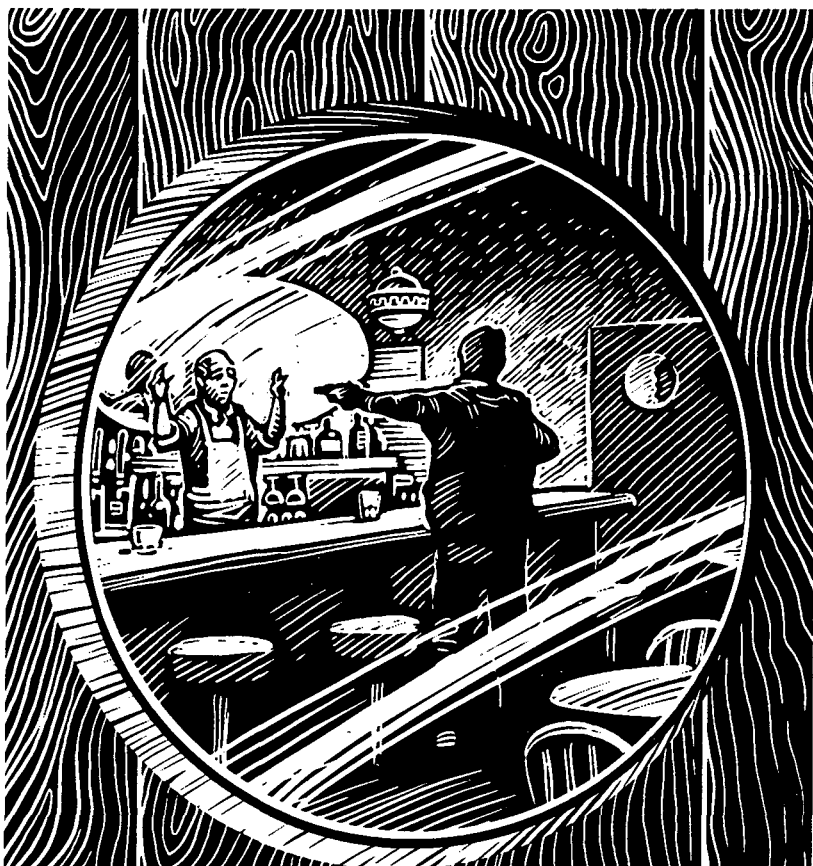
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FICTION



KINSELLA'S SALOON

Gregory Fallis

Illustration by Tim Foley

Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 5/01

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Nobody looks good after a night in jail, and Mike McTaggart had been sleeping between county sheets for three nights. On the best day of his life McTaggart wouldn't have been called a goodlooking man. He had a big, bony, Easter Island face, and at some point in his life he'd lost his right eye. If he owned a glass eye or an eyepatch, he hadn't brought it with him to jail. Unwashed, stubble-chinned, and eyeless. It's not an attractive combination.

"I didn't do it," he said.

Kathleen O'Mara nodded. She's a lawyer, Kathleen, and it's part of her job to nod when her client claims not to have done it. Joop Wheeler and I are just private investigators; we don't have to nod.

"Mr. McTaggart, it's my job to represent you whether you did it or not," she said. "But I've seen the police file, and I have to say it doesn't look good for you. There are witnesses who say you were in Kinsella's Saloon that night and that you got into an argument with Mr. Tully, the bartender."

"So what?" McTaggart said. "I gave Tully a twenty for a shot and a beer, and he said I only gave him a five. So I called him a crook. Big deal."

Kinsella's Saloon was a rough Irish bar in what used to be a rough working class neighborhood of Hobsbawm, Massachusetts. It was down by the docks where the boats used to unload before the fishing industry went sour. The neighborhood is slowly being gentrified, but Kinsella's was locked in a time warp. It was a serious bar for seri-

ous drinkers, the sort of place where a man could order a shot of whisky and a draft beer and expect change from a five.

"The witnesses said you threatened him," Kathleen said.

"Threatened him," McTaggart scoffed. "I said I'd take care of him later."

"There's folks would call that a threat," Joop said. He's from South Carolina, Joop, and his speech has a slowness and roundness to it. It sounds almost exotic here on the Massachusetts seacoast.

"I don't care what they call it," McTaggart said. "It don't mean I robbed Kinsella's. And it don't mean I killed Tully."

It was one of those freak accidents. Whoever robbed Kinsella's Saloon arrived shortly after the last customer left. The robber emptied the cash register and fired a single bullet into the liquor bottles lined up behind the bar.

It was probably meant to be a dramatic gesture, the sort of thing you see in the movies. Just like in the movies the liquor bottles shattered. Real life, though, works on less forgiving laws of physics. A shard of glass the size of a man's thumb ricocheted from a broken bottle of Jameson's whisky and sliced into Tully's neck. It opened up his carotid artery, and Tully collapsed behind the bar and bled to death. It probably took two, three minutes. Exsanguination, the doctors call it. Bleeding out.

The robber might not have even been aware Tully had been hurt.

Not that it mattered. It's called felony murder. Any death that oc-



curs during the commission of a dangerous felony is considered murder. It didn't matter that the robber deliberately aimed away from Tully, didn't matter that the death was a fluke. All that mattered was that Tully was dead and that his death came about during the commission of an armed robbery.

One-eyed Mike McTaggart, the prime suspect for the robbery, was looking at twenty-five to life for a crime that probably netted less than four hundred dollars.

"The police identified the bullet as a .380 caliber," Kathleen said. "It seems to be common knowledge among the regular patrons of Kinsella's that you own a .380 caliber handgun. This morning the police got a warrant to search your house and your car for the weapon. Are they going to find it?"

Kathleen's a good defense lawyer. She wasn't asking McTaggart if he'd killed Tully, accidentally or not; she was only asking if he had possession of the murder weapon. It's the sort of fine distinction lawyers love.

McTaggart shook his head. "I already told the cops I don't have that gun no more," he said. "Nobody listens. That gun, it got stolen from my car a while back. Couple of months ago maybe."

"Did you report the theft to the police?" I asked.

McTaggart shook his head. "It was just an old gun," he said. "Wasn't worth much. What're the cops going to do? They got more important things to do than chase after an old gun."

"Not any more they don't," Joop said.

"There was a witness," Kathleen said. "A cleaning man in the back room, looking through a window in the door. He told the police the robber was wearing a ski mask, so he can't say it was you. But the robber was your height and weight."

"There's a million people my height and weight," McTaggart said. "That don't mean it was me. And there ain't no cleaning man at Kinsella's."

Kathleen gave another of her patient, lawyerly nods. "Cleaning man, busboy, whatever he was he ducked below the window when he saw the robber. But after the shot was fired and the front door slammed, he went into the barroom and found Tully bleeding to death on the floor. And Tully spoke to him."

"What did Tully say?" Joop asked, feeding Kathleen the line.

"He said he'd been shot by a one-eyed man."

McTaggart blinked his one eye and sputtered. "Well, it wasn't me," he said. "Somebody's made a mistake here. Somebody's going to owe me an apology."

"So what do you think?" Kathleen asked. We stood around her car in the county jail parking lot. It wasn't the most convenient place to hold a strategy meeting, but at least it was in the open air and free of the stink of jail.

"I think that's an ugly man," Joop said. "Maybe not circus ugly, but he's damned close. How'd he lose that eye?"



"Fishing accident," Kathleen said patiently. Almost any conversation with Joop requires a bit of patience. He's an odd man, given to distraction and going off on tangents, but he's a remarkably good investigator. Sometimes the tangents pay off.

"How he lost his eye isn't important. What's important is . . ."

"It'll be important to a jury," Joop said. "Juries don't like ugly people. A man that ugly is going to be easy to convict. You got to get him a glass eye or a pirate's patch if this ever gets anywhere near a jury."

"If this case gets anywhere near a jury, I'll be guilty of malpractice. This looks like a stone loser. I'm not looking to win this case, just to get the least punitive sentence. That's what you guys are here for. Find me something that will give me some leverage in a plea negotiation."

It was going to be what Joop calls a 3F case—fishing for flaws. If we could find a flaw in the prosecution's case, any flaw—an error in the way evidence was collected, a discrepancy in a witness's statement, an inconsistency in the police reports—Kathleen might be able to plea-bargain for a lighter sentence or even a lesser charge. It's the way the justice system works.

"I'd suggest starting with the witness," she said, flipping through the pages of her legal pad. "The cleaning man. I have his name here somewhere . . ."

"Before we go any further, there might be a problem," I said. "I have a potential conflict of interest. My wife knew the victim. So did I, for that matter."

Kathleen blinked several times. "Tully? You knew him?"

Joop grinned. "I declare, Sweeney knows every Irishman in Massachusetts," he said. "I think it must be a tribal thing. They probably have a secret handshake."

I'd first met Seamus Tully years earlier when I was a uniformed police officer. Every Hobsbawm street cop has been called to Kinsella's Saloon to make an arrest or stop a fight. It's almost part of the training. It was that sort of place. Tully had come to America from Ireland in the late 1950's . . . on the run from the Irish police, according to the rumors, because of IRA activity. He took a job tending bar at Kinsella's and never left. He must have been close to seventy years old.

"Mary Margaret knew him better than I did," I said. "They went to the same church, and she used Tully every year as a guest lecturer for her class."

My wife teaches a class in Irish language and culture at the community college. Tully had been born in the west of Ireland, in the Gaeltacht, and was a native Gaelic speaker. He'd visit her class and tell stories and sing traditional songs in Irish. Mary Margaret had been upset to hear Tully had been killed, and doubly distressed to learn I might be helping defend the man accused of the killing.

"Will that influence your investigation?" Kathleen asked.

I shook my head. "No, but I thought you should know."

Kathleen considered the situation for a moment, then made a dis-



missive gesture. "I don't think it's a problem," she said. "Where was I?"

"The cleaning man," Joop said.

"Right, the cleaning man," Kathleen said, shuffling through her notes again. "I'd start with him. His name is Ward Doggett." She frowned. "That name sounds familiar, doesn't it?"

Joop grinned. "Skeets," he said.

Kathleen's eyes widened. "Ward Doggett is Skeets?" She grinned as widely as Joop. "Their main witness is Skeets? I think you've earned your fee already."

"Reasonable doubt at a reasonable price," Joop said, grinning. He nudged me in the arm. "Come on, bunk," he said. "Let's put your Irish butt to work. Let's go chat with my old buddy Skeets."

He's a creature of habit, Skeets. When the weather is nice, he's usually in the small park across the street from City Hall and the police department. That's where we looked, and that's where we found him, sitting on a bench staring vacantly at some starlings that were milling around and making a lot of noise.

Skeets is a local legend in the Massachusetts seacoast legal community. Like Kinsella's Saloon, he's a throwback to the old days when Hobsbawm was a rough and tumble fishing town. Then the fish got scarce, the fishing industry died a slow and painful death, the canneries closed their doors, the fishing boats got sold or found more productive waters, and most of the dockworkers found other work or

moved on. But not Skeets. He stayed in Hobsbawm doing whatever odd jobs he could around the waterfront. Like a lot of younger dockworkers Skeets was a hard-drinking man and he'd earned a reputation as a bar brawler. One night Skeets committed an act so horrible he crossed over the line into bar brawler legend.

He'd gotten into a fight in some waterside bar, and a half dozen police officers arrived to break it up. Skeets took them on as well. He stunned one officer with a head butt, then put his mouth over the officer's eye and sucked the eyeball out of the socket.

The other officers, when they recovered from their shock, beat Skeets to a bloody pulp. They beat him at the bar, and beat him again in the squad car as they drove him to the jail, and again after they arrived. They might have given him an extra thump or two on the drive to the hospital.

The doctors were able to put the officer's eye back in his head, but he never regained full vision and eventually took a medical retirement. Skeets was laid up in the hospital for a couple of months before he could appear in court. He suffered brain damage from the beating, and his face was badly scarred. He pled guilty to mayhem and assault on a police officer and did three and a half years of a five year sentence at Walpole.

For the past couple of years Skeets has been living on the streets. He sleeps in an old shed down by the docks in the warm months and in a flophouse during



the cold ones. He gets some money from Social Security but not quite enough to live on. He does a little panhandling, but his face is too disfigured and scary for him to have much success at it. Even though he hangs out in the park across from the police station, the cops don't harass him much. They feel a certain rough justice was achieved. Forty months in prison and permanent brain damage, they think, is what a person should expect for sucking the eyeball out of a cop's head.

Joop and Skeets have an odd sort of relationship. Before we opened our private investigative agency, Joop had been a reporter for the local newspaper. He'd done a story on Skeets, one of those local history fluff pieces. Skeets developed an almost puppylike fondness for Joop, and Joop has formed a peculiar affection for Skeets. He always gives the poor bugger a few dollars when he sees him.

He looked like a gargoye, Skeets, sitting hunched over on a park bench. He's a big man, but since the beating he's carried himself stooped over so he looks smaller. His face is still scarred, his forehead has a noticeable dent, his nose is an unsightly lump of wayward cartilage and his right ear looks like it's been chewed on by a big dog. He was dressed in the same old shabby, colorless overcoat he's worn every day, rain or shine, for the last couple of years.

He smiled goofily at Joop as we approached. He didn't share the smile with me.

"Hey there, Mr. Wheeler," Skeets

said. "Hey, how're you doin'? What'd you have for breakfast?"

While in prison Skeets became preoccupied with his food. He keeps a little notebook in the pocket of his overcoat, and he scrupulously maintains a record of everything he eats. Time, place, and a detailed description of the food item—its texture, color, smell, and size of the serving. Nothing about its taste. Joop, to my knowledge, is the only person Skeets has ever shown the notebook to. It's a dubious distinction, but it shows how much he trusts Joop.

"I'm fine, Skeets," Joop said. "And I had me a corn muffin for breakfast. A big one. About the size of your fist." He nodded toward me. "You remember my partner Kevin Sweeney, don't you?"

Skeets looked at me and nodded; then turned back to Joop. "Breakfast is the most important meal of the day," he said. "You gots to take a good breakfast. That's what my grammy used to say. She'd say 'A good breakfast'll get you through the day.' And she was right."

"She was a clever woman, your grammy," I said.

He blinked in my direction, then turned back to Joop and smiled. "We never had no corn muffins, but my grammy, she used to make bran muffins," he said. "On Sundays. She'd make a big batch, and we'd eat 'em all week."

"That sounds real nice," Joop said, nodding. "Listen, Skeets, we need to ask you a few questions. About Tully and what happened at Kinsella's Saloon."

"Sure, Mr. Wheeler," he said with



great sincerity. "I'll tell you anything you want to know. All you got to do is ask me."

"We just want to know what you can remember about that night."

Skeets nodded. "Mike McTaggart, he came in after the bar was closed, and he robbed old Tully and killed him," Skeets said. "Shot him in the..."

Joop held up a hand, interrupting. "How about we start at the beginning," he said. "You Yankees are so abrupt. Let's just take our time and tell the story right."

Joop led Skeets through his story. He'd arrived at Kinsella's Saloon slightly before closing time. He wasn't really an employee, but Tully used to give him a few dollars for sweeping up at night. There was only one customer in the saloon when Skeets arrived, an old man called Fitz. Skeets didn't know his real name. Fitz left shortly after Skeets arrived. Skeets put the chairs up on the tables and swept the floor. He'd stepped into the back room to put away his broom and dustpan when he heard yelling from the saloon.

"There's this window in the door there," Skeets said. "I looked through it, this window, and there's Mike McTaggart robbing old Tully."

"You could see his face?" Joop asked.

Skeets shook his head. "He had on one of those things. A ski mask."

"If you couldn't see his face, how do you know it was McTaggart?" I asked.

Skeets looked at me, then at Joop. Joop nodded. "It's okay," he told Skeets. "You can answer his

question. Sweeney and I are partners, remember? What made you think the man in the mask was McTaggart?"

"'Cause everybody says it was," Skeets said. "Even Tully, he said it."

"Tully said that?" Joop asked. "You're sure?"

Skeets nodded.

"When did he say it?" I asked.

"After he was shot," Skeets said. He frowned in concentration. "When I saw what was happening, I ducked down and hid. Then there was this bang. That was the gun going off. And then I heard the front door slamming shut, so I went out to see what happened. And there was old Tully, back there behind the bar bleeding and stuff. I asked him was he okay. I knew he wasn't okay because of all the blood, but I didn't know what else to say."

"That's okay, Skeets," Joop said. "It's hard to know what to say at times like that. You asked Tully if he was okay, and what did Tully say?"

"He said something . . . I don't know what," Skeets said. "He talks some other language sometimes. I didn't understand him, so I said, 'I don't understand you.' And then Tully, he said, 'That one-eyed son-of-a-bitch shot me.'"

"Those were his exact words?" Joop asked.

Skeets nodded. "That one-eyed son-of-a-bitch."

"He didn't specifically say it was McTaggart?" I asked.

Skeets hesitated, then shook his head. "But I don't know anybody else who's only got one eye," he said.



"When you first saw the man in the ski mask, did you think it was McTaggart?"

Skeets shook his head. "I didn't think nothing," he said. "I was too scared. But he's only got one eye, and the police, they arrested him."

"Skeets, did you know McTaggart owned a handgun?" I asked.

Skeets looked again at Joop before answering. "Sure, everybody knew that," he said. "He tried to sell it a couple of times right there in the saloon."

"Did McTaggart ever say anything about that gun being stolen?"

Skeets shook his head. "I never heard nothing about that."

Joop clapped Skeets on the shoulder. "Skeets, thanks a lot for talking with us," he said. "You were very helpful. You're a good man. Sweetney and I really appreciate it."

Joop looked at me and sort of nodded toward Skeets.

I can take a hint. "Yes, thanks," I said. "Very helpful." Joop frowned slightly and nodded towards Skeets again. It took a second before I realized what he wanted. I sighed, then reached into my pocket for some cash. I started to hand Skeets a dollar, but Joop snagged a five out of my fist and handed it to him. He's always been free with my money, Joop.

"Here, Skeets, you go buy yourself a bran muffin," Joop said. "Like the ones your grammy used to make."

"Gee, thanks, Mr. Wheeler," Skeets said. He looked at me and I think he came close to thanking me, but in the end he just sort of nodded.

"A five for a bran muffin?" I asked as we walked away.

"Hey, bunk, I'm just trying to get Skeets to like you," Joop said. "You scare the pudding out of that poor boy."

The afternoon was turning toward evening, and Joop and I decided we should visit the scene of the crime and have a jar. The neighborhood around Kinsella's Saloon is called Moose Creek. It bottomed out a few years after the fishing industry died, and for a decade or so Moose Creek hovered on the verge of becoming a slum. Then it was discovered by artists who couldn't afford to live and work down the road in Boston. Now the neighborhood is undergoing a sort of rebirth. Small shops and galleries have started to appear, and little cafes with awnings and alfresco sidewalk seating.

Kinsella's Saloon belonged to the old Moose Creek and looked somewhat out of place next to an art supply shop. It was a strictly utilitarian drinking saloon. No plants, no dartboards, no slate with the daily specials . . . just a long narrow room with a bar, a few tables, and a row of booths along one side. Above the bar an off-hue television was tuned to a Red Sox game.

It should have been a busy time; people were getting off work and heading for their local boozers. But there were only half a dozen customers, each of them sitting alone, lost in their own thoughts or grimly watching the Sox drop another game.

The barman had a cheerful face

and the beginning of a belly. He greeted us with a cheerful huckster's smile. "Something to drink?" he asked. Then he chuckled. "Silly question. You're in a saloon—of course you want something to drink."

Joop asked for an expensive locally brewed ale. I ordered a Guinness.

"Good man, yourself," the barman said. "There's nothing like a Guinness. For the drinking and the drawing, I'd rather draw off a pint of Guinness than open the finest bottle of wine."

He did draw a good pint, I'll give him that, and he seemed to take great pleasure in it. He held the glass under the tap and let the dark stout ease into it until it was about three quarters full. He set the glass on the counter to settle.

"Look at that, would you," he said. "Have you ever seen anything so lovely? The way it dances and spirals and swirls in the glass."

It was just bar patter, but I had to smile. The man was enjoying the sound of his voice as much as he did drawing the pint. Clearly he liked having a new audience. He probably felt he was wasting his talents on the regulars of Kinsella's Saloon.

"A beer's a beer, but a Guinness is something special," the barman said. "You can't rush a Guinness. At least you shouldn't. All the best things in life should be taken slowly, don't you think?"

Joop was grinning. He likes to see people enjoy themselves, Joop. "I'm a Southern boy," he said. "We're big fans of slow."

The barman grinned back. He nodded toward the pint glass. "Look at the way the stout settles," he said. "The way it turns the most lovely black. Not an absolute black, but a soulful black. A meaningful black. A black full of promise."

He reached for the pint glass and held it up respectfully. "And now that it's properly settled, we top it off. A good pint of Guinness needs a smooth, off-white head." He put the glass back under the tap for a moment, then turned and set the finished pint of Guinness on the bar in front of me.

"Look at that," he said. "Close to perfection. Angelic, is what it is."

"I almost hate to drink it," I said.

"There's no point in drawing a perfect pint if nobody drinks it," the barman said.

I took a long sip. "It's grand," I said. I held out my hand. "My name's Kevin Sweeney," I said. "This is Joop Wheeler."

The barman shook our hands. "Tim Sullivan," he said. "Publican and manager of this shabby establishment."

"I was hoping that's who you were," I said. Joop and I showed him our P.I. licenses. "We need to ask you a few questions about what happened here."

Sullivan's expansive barman's smile disappeared and was replaced by a more shallow, polite one. "I went off duty around six that night," he said. "I wasn't here when it happened. I didn't see anything, I don't know anything, and I have no thoughts on the matter at all."

Sullivan picked up a bar towel and began to polish a pint glass.



He glanced at a pale discolored spot on the wide-planked pine floor behind the bar, just by the cash register. The spot had obviously been so vigorously scrubbed that the varnish had been removed.

"Did you ever have any problems with Mike McTaggart?" Joop asked.

Sullivan shook his head. "I didn't have any problems with him because I wouldn't tolerate his sort of behavior."

"Tully did?" I asked.

Sullivan shrugged. "I don't mean to speak ill of the dead, but Tully was soft in some ways. Rather than nip a problem customer in the bud, he'd let things slide. Then he'd erupt in a grand display of Irish temper, yelling and cursing in Gaelic." He stared at the pint glass for a moment. "This never should have happened," he said. "I told Tully what to do if he was ever robbed. Turn over the money, I told him, it's not worth getting shot."

"Were you aware McTaggart owned a handgun?" I asked.

Sullivan nodded. "Everybody here knew that," he said. "He tried to sell it here in the bar a few times, but I put a stop to it. Told him to never bring the gun around here again. He even tried to sell his glass eye one night. That's the sort of man McTaggart is. The sort who'd sell his own glass eye and the sort nobody would buy it from."

"Was McTaggart having financial problems?" Joop asked.

"Everybody who drinks here has problems of some sort," he said. "That's why they drink here."

He surveyed the saloon with a

critical eye. "Look at this place," he said quietly. "This bar is dying. It's been dying for years. Most of the people who used to drink here moved away. Or died. And the people who are moving into the neighborhood don't want to drink here because Kinsella's has a reputation for fights and brawls even though we haven't had a fight here in nearly a year. We've become a magnet for robbers; we've been robbed half a dozen times in the last eight months. This place could be . . . so much more than it is. It could be a haven for all the local artists and writers. It could be something special. People could sit over a pint of Guinness and have intellectual discussions. As it is now, nobody here can afford the Guinness. I don't know why I stock it."

Sullivan sighed. "Maybe this is what it takes," he said. "Maybe it'll take Tully's death to finally kill Kinsella's saloon. And maybe that's not a bad thing."

Joop and I sat there quietly for a moment. Joop coughed politely. "We're looking to talk to one of your regular customers," he said. "A man named Fitz."

"He's not here," Sullivan said.

"Do you know where we can find him?"

"No idea," Sullivan said, shaking his head. "Why are you looking for Fitz?"

"He was the last person to leave the bar before the robbery," I said. "We just want to find out what he saw when he left."

"How do you know Fitz was the last person to leave?" Sullivan asked.



"A witness," I said. "Somebody else who was in the bar at the time."

Sullivan shook his head in disgust. "Skeets," he said. "I don't know why anybody would listen to him. He's an idiot."

"Do you know Fitz's full name?" I asked.

Sullivan shook his head. He turned to the other customers. "Any of you guys know where to find Fitz?"

"Haven't seen him since the murder," one man said. The others agreed, Fitz hadn't been around since Tully was killed.

"You know what Fitz's name is?" Sullivan asked.

"Don't know and don't care," another man said.

"Check with Kinsella," the first man said. "He'd know. Fitz has been around almost as long as Tully. Kinsella would know."

"Where can we find Kinsella?" I asked Sullivan.

"I'm afraid I can't give out that information," Sullivan said. "Confidential."

"We understand," Joop said. "And thanks for your help." He's always polite, Joop is. He reached into his pocket for some cash to pay for the drinks. After he dropped a ten on the bar, I reached over and snagged a twenty from his hand and gave it to Sullivan.

"Buy these gentlemen a little something for their help," I said. "And a pint of Guinness for yourself."

Joop gave me a look.

"I just want them to like you," I said.

That night I went to church with Mary Margaret. I'm not a religious man. I attend mass twice a year, on Christmas and Easter, and that's mostly to please the wife. But there was a memorial service for Seamus Tully at St. Aloysius. Mary Margaret, kind soul that she is, wanted to pay her respects, and I couldn't think of a good excuse to get out of it.

It was a small gathering, no more than twenty people. They were all what Mary Margaret calls the "wake and baptism crew," the earnest and lonely churchgoers who attend every parish ceremony regardless of what it is or who it's for. I didn't see anybody from Kinsella's Saloon. Tully had no family that anybody knew about, so the parish had made arrangements for his burial.

Mary Margaret and I sat there while Father Hannan tried to make some sense out of old Tully's death. All the way from Ireland, he'd come, only to bleed to death in a failing waterfront tavern. I found myself saying a quiet prayer for the old man. It was a sad and stupid way to die.

I held Mary Margaret's hand as everybody filed by to pay their last respects to old Tully. She put her hand on the casket and closed her eyes for a moment. "*Go ndéanai Dia trócaire ar a anam,*" she said. May God have mercy on your soul.

Joop and I spent the next morning working the phones. I called Marty Coyle, an old buddy on the Hobsbawm P.D., and asked if he could pull the reports of any old



robberies at Kinsella's Saloon. He cheerfully told me to get stuffed, which I'd expected. It's against the law and departmental policy to give restricted information to civilians. It's only on television police detectives do research for a private investigators as a favor. So I called Kathleen and asked her to file a motion for the police to produce the information. It would take another day or so, but we'd get the reports.

Joop called the Alcohol Control Board to check on the liquor license for Kinsella's Saloon. You can't sell beer, wine, or spirits in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts without a license, and that license is public information. The license includes the name and address of the owner.

Kinsella's Saloon was owned by Peter Kinsella, who lived in South Wellfleet on Cape Cod. If we'd had an affluent client, Joop and I would have thrown darts to see who went to the Cape to interview Kinsella. It's almost always best to do an interview face to face. But since McTaggart didn't have much money and we'd be collecting our fee from the state's Indigent Defense Fund, I just called him on the telephone.

Kinsella was a classic Irish success story, and he was happy to tell me about it. He'd bought the bar from a Greek family back in the late 1960's, and he worked long hours to make it profitable. He used the profits from the saloon to buy an old building nearby that he turned into apartments.

Before long he owned a handful of old apartment and office buildings down near the harbor. Then

came the 1980's and the Massachusetts economy went in the tank. Kinsella had a mild heart attack and decided to sell everything but the saloon. Around that time Kinsella gave his youngest son the seed money to start a local internet service provider.

Kinsella continued to work part-time in the saloon. Then his son's internet company went regional, and Kinsella suddenly found himself sitting on a small fortune in telecommunications stock. He retired to Cape Cod but kept the saloon to remind himself of his roots. Five years ago he'd hired Tim Sullivan to manage it for him while he sat on the beach and watched the tide come in and go out. The saloon hadn't shown much profit for the last two years and this year it would lose money, but he wasn't concerned. He didn't need the money.

Sullivan had called to tell him about Tully and the robbery.

"I hired old Tully, you know," Kinsella said. "He was a tough old harp from the west of Ireland. Had a shady past, but hell, we loved that IRA stuff back in the sixties. He was the real thing, Tully was. Spoke Irish, knew all the old songs, told great stories. He should have retired a few years ago, but what else was he going to do? Is there going to be a memorial service, do you know?"

"They held it last night," I told him.

"Damn," he said. "I should have driven up for it. Or sent flowers or something. It's just that . . . well, you know. You retire and you get lazy."



"It's easy to do," I said. "Do you know Mike McTaggart?"

"That the guy they arrested?" Kinsella asked. "Never heard of him. But I haven't even been to the place in two, three years."

"What about a man named Fitz?" I asked.

"Fitz," Kinsella said. "Sure, I know Fitz. He was an old buddy of Tully's. They used to go fishing together. Talked about buying a boat when they retired. I used to rent Fitz a small apartment in one of those buildings down near the docks. Probably doesn't live there any more. Probably can't afford it. I hear they're refurbishing those places and renting them to yuppies for a fortune. I should have kept a few of them. Brick walls, everybody wants brick walls now. When I converted those buildings we had to put paneling over the brick before we could rent the apartments. It's a crazy damned world, isn't it."

"Yes," I said. "Yes, it is. Do you know Fitz's full name?"

"Hugh Fitzgerald," he said. Kinsella paused for a moment. "You know . . . maybe I should sell the bar now. I've got no reason to hang on to it. Sullivan's been after me to sell it to him for a year or two. Maybe this would be a good time to get rid of it. Damned place is more trouble than it's worth. Gets robbed every few months now. I used to love that place, but now . . . I don't know if I'll ever go back there. Not with Tully dying in it like that. It was messy, I hear, the way he died."

"Yes," I said, thinking of that pale spot on the pine floor. "I'm afraid it was."

Kinsella was right; Hugh Fitzgerald no longer lived in the brick-walled apartments near the harbor. But he was easy to trace; his name was in the phone book. He was now in a third floor walk-up in a poor neighborhood of Hobsbawm.

The neighborhood had been poor Irish when I was growing up. Now it was poor Afro-Caribbean. Jamaican and Haitian immigrants mostly. Like the artists and writers, they can't afford to live in Boston. Nothing ever stays the same, and that's both wonderful and sad.

Fitzgerald greeted Joop and me at the door wearing a sleeveless T-shirt, baggy grey trousers patched at the knee, and a small tweed cap set back on his head. He must have been close to seventy, one of those thin old Irishmen who look like they're carved out of tough, knobby wood.

He invited us in and offered us a cup of tea, which Joop accepted. One of us usually accepts whatever refreshment is offered even if we don't want it. It's a good investigative practice. It's harder for a person to toss you out if you're drinking his tea. Serving a beverage sets up a sort of false social bond between the server and the served. A lot of detective work is grounded in false social bonds.

Fitzgerald served the tea in an actual teacup and saucer instead of the more common mug. He also brought out a small plate of mint cookies. My mother used to serve tea that way.

I asked him about the night of the robbery at Kinsella's Saloon.



"Oh, right," he said. "I guess I was the last customer to leave Kinsella's that night. If I'd known what was going to happen . . ." He shook his head.

"There's no way you could have known, Mr. Fitzgerald," Joop said. "But the sentiment does you credit."

Fitzgerald looked at Joop for a moment. He turned to me and jabbed a bony thumb in Joop's direction. "Where'd you pick this one up?"

He gets that a lot, Joop. A Southern accent seems to take New Englanders by surprise. Most people seem to like it, but some don't and you can never tell.

"He imported me from South Carolina," Joop said. "He couldn't find an Irishman to work for such low wages."

Fitzgerald cackled, showing a mouthful of strong yellowed teeth.

"Do you know Mike McTaggart?" Joop asked.

Fitzgerald nodded, and his eyes went hard. "I do. And I can say I never liked that one-eyed bugger."

"Were you at the bar earlier that night when Tully and McTaggart argued?"

"I was," Fitzgerald said. He told us McTaggart had been causing problems at Kinsella's Saloon for about six months. McTaggart was having money trouble; he'd been laid off from his job as a welder and had been forced to take day work, which paid less and gave no benefits. One night a few weeks earlier McTaggart had tried to pay for his bar bill with a credit card only to learn he'd gone over his spending

limit. From that night on McTaggart had been forced to pay for his drinks in cash.

"It wasn't Tully's doing," Fitzgerald said. "It was that cheap bugger Sullivan made him do it. You can't blame McTaggart for resenting it. A slap at his pride, making him pay cash for each drink. That night McTaggart thought Tully had given him the wrong change. He called Tully a thief and a crook."

"What did Tully say?" I asked.

"Told him to shut his gob and get out of the bar," Fitzgerald said. "Tully didn't take any crap from people."

"His gob?" Joop asked.

"His cake hole," Fitzgerald said. "His mouth."

"Cake hole," Joop said, grinning. "Gob. I just love the way y'all talk."

"How did McTaggart respond to that?" I asked.

"He left," Fitzgerald said. "But he said he'd be back later to settle up with Tully. I didn't give it much attention. McTaggart can be a right bastard; no mistake, but I didn't figure him for something like this."

"You knew McTaggart had a gun?" Joop asked.

"I did," Fitzgerald said. "He tried to sell it to me once, there in the bar. Sullivan was behind the stick that night and made McTaggart go put the gun in his car." He shook his head. "I'm wishing I'd bought the damned thing now, so I am. Maybe Tully would still be alive."

"Did McTaggart ever say anything to you about his gun being stolen?" I asked.

Fitzgerald shook his head. "Is that what he's saying, is it?" he asked. "Sure, it's a pathetic bit of a



story, now, isn't it. No, he never said a word about its being stolen. Not that I heard."

"He said it was stolen from his car."

Fitzgerald shrugged. "It's possible," he said. "Security isn't Kinsella's strong point. Only an idjit would leave something of value in a car parked outside Kinsella's Saloon, especially a gun. Still, McTaggart is an idjit, right enough, so it's possible."

"Did you see anybody or anything out of the ordinary when you left the saloon?"

Fitzgerald took off his cap, scratched his scalp, and settled the cap back on his head. "Not a thing," he said. "Unless you count that wet-brained lunatic Skeets. He came slinking in just before I left, and he's a wee bit out of the ordinary."

"Slinking?" I asked.

Fitzgerald nodded. "Sullivan didn't like Skeets' being around the saloon," he said. "Tully used to pay Skeets a few bucks to sweep the floor at night. Sullivan said it was a waste of money and told Skeets to keep out unless he had the price of a drink on him. But Tully had Skeets in to sweep all the same and paid him a little something out of his own pocket without Sullivan's knowing about it. He has the heart of a gombeen man, Sullivan does. It's all dollars and cents with him."

"Gombeen man?" Joop asked.

"A usurer," I translated. "A tight-fisted schemer."

Fitzgerald sighed. "He was a good man, Tully was," he said. "Kinsella's won't be the same without him. Do you know, I've been going to Kin-

sella's three or four nights a week for the last twenty years or more. But I've not gone back since it happened. I'm not sure I will go back."

Joop made some sort of sympathetic noise. He's good at sympathetic noises. I've often wondered if that's a Southern thing.

"The last words Tully spoke to me," Fitzgerald said. "I was saying goodnight, and Tully was saying he'd be locking up after I left. The last words he spoke to me . . . he said, '*Slán abhaile.*' And it's me should have been saying it to him."

"He said what?" Joop asked.

"Safe home," I said. "It's Gaelic. May you be safe on the way home."

Fitzgerald smiled at me. "*An bhfuil Gaeilge agut?*" Do you speak Gaelic?

I shrugged. "*Tá, beagáinín,*" I said. Yes, a little. "My wife teaches a course in Gaelic at the community college."

"It's a silly language, Gaelic," Fitzgerald said. "But God bless your wife and the community college for keeping it alive. I never learned but a little of the Irish as a boy. Tully kept rattling at me in it, though, and now I'm wishing I'd paid more attention. I'm wishing I paid more attention to everything."

The following morning Kathleen called to say I could drop by Hobsbawm P.D. and pick up copies of the old robbery reports. She suggested we all meet for a late lunch and discuss the case. Joop wouldn't like it—he hates talking business over food—but it was the only time Kathleen had free. She said she



wanted to try a new Middle Eastern restaurant down near the harbor, not far from Kinsella's Saloon, in fact. It was Hobsbawm's first Middle Eastern restaurant.

I wasn't happy with the plan either. I'd planned to meet Mary Margaret for lunch. We'd been wanting to try the same restaurant. Feeling guilty, I called her and canceled. I decided not to tell her I'd be eating there with Joop and Kathleen. Women are odd about such things.

Joop and I split up and spent the morning interviewing other regular customers of Kinsella's Saloon. We didn't learn anything new.

I picked up the copies of the old robbery reports on the way to meet Kathleen and Joop for lunch. Marty Coyle grinned as he handed me the copies. He told me about his own introduction to Tully. He'd been a uniformed cop at the time and had responded to a report of a brawl. When he arrived, three drunks were sitting on the doorstep holding their bloody heads. Tully was standing in the doorway holding a fish billy—a club used by fishermen to knock out large fish.

"I should've confiscated that fish billy," Coyle said, laughing. "But I was afraid the old bastard would use it on me if I tried. One of a kind, old Tully. I hope your man fries. No offense."

Coyle smiled again and winked at me.

I scanned the police reports when I got back in my car. Sullivan, the manager of Kinsella's, had called the saloon a magnet for robbers, and he was far from wrong. There had been a number of small bur-

glaries and incidents of vandalism, but I was surprised to see the saloon had been robbed five times in the last eight months, each time by a man in a ski mask. Sullivan had been behind the bar all but the last time, when old Tully died. I guess Tully's luck had run out.

When I arrived at the restaurant, I found Joop and Kathleen sitting and chatting with my wife. Mary Margaret had decided to take herself to the Middle Eastern restaurant anyway. She'd been surprised and a wee bit embarrassed to find we were going to have a lunch meeting there. She'd offered to leave, but Kathleen wouldn't hear of it.

Mary Margaret promised to sit quietly while the three of us went over the case. But she's not by nature a quiet woman, Mary Margaret. When the food and drink arrived, she raised her glass of sweet lemonade in a toast. "*Sláinte chuig na fir, agus go mairfidh na mná go deo,*" she said.

Joop and Kathleen turned to me. I shrugged. We all looked at Mary Margaret.

"Health to the men," she translated, "and may the women live forever."

We all raised our glasses and drank.

"Okay, to work," Kathleen said. "The police searched McTaggart's home and car but didn't turn up any guns or a wad of cash. So there's no physical evidence directly tying him to the robbery. All we have to contend with are two awkward facts. First, the witnesses who heard him threaten Tully. And sec-



ond, Tully told Skeets that McTaggart was the son-of-a-bitch who shot him."

"Son of a priest," Mary Margaret said.

"Pardon?" Kathleen said.

"Sorry, didn't mean to interrupt," Mary Margaret said. "McTaggart in Irish is *Mac an tSagairt*. It means 'son of a priest.'"

"I think Tully would insist it means son-of-a-bitch," Kathleen said.

"Tully, poor man," Mary Margaret said. "*Tuille*. In the Irish it means a flood. He was a sweet old man."

"Kinsella," Joop said to Mary Margaret. "What does that mean?" Joop can turn anything into a game, and he'd much rather play games over lunch than talk about business.

"*Cinnsealach*," Mary Margaret said. "Authoritative."

"What about Fitzgerald?" Joop asked, laughing.

"Fitzgerald, it isn't an Irish name at all," Mary Margaret said. "Not at all. Not really."

"Fitzgerald isn't Irish?" Joop asked.

She shook her head. "It's Norman French, so it is," she said. "A hundred years or so after the Normans conquered the Saxons in England, they tried to do the same to the Irish. So the Norman soldiers crossed the Irish sea in their boats and set out all fierce to fight the Irish, but when they saw the Irish women . . ."

"They fainted dead away," I said.

Mary Margaret punched me lightly on the shoulder. "They were

over the moon in love with them," she said. "And so the Normans stayed in Ireland and married the Irish women, and their children became Irish children . . . which is how it should be."

Joop raised his glass. "Health to the men and may the women live forever."

I cleared my throat. "Back to business," I said. "I don't think we'll have much trouble showing Skeets is an unreliable witness. The man is a brain-damaged ex-convict, after all."

Kathleen nodded. "I'd agree normally," she said. "But the only part of his testimony that really matters is that he heard Tully identify McTaggart. Why would anybody, even a brain-damaged ex-con, make that up? Unless he was involved in the robbery himself. Maybe we should point the finger at Skeets? All we need to do is muddle up the matter, create some reasonable doubt."

"We could," I said. "He has a history of violence."

Joop made a face. It was clear he didn't like the idea of suggesting Skeets had killed Tully, and who could blame him? But pointing the finger at somebody else is a standard defense strategy.

"It has possibilities," Kathleen said. "Wasn't he banned from the bar? Maybe he had a grudge against Tully for banning him."

"He was banned from the saloon," I said. "But not by Tully."

"It was the manager who banned him," Joop said. "The *gombeen* man. Sullivan."

"One-eyed," Mary Margaret said.



"No, not McTaggart," I said. "He's the defendant. Sullivan is the manager of Kinsella's Saloon. He has both his eyes."

Mary Margaret shook her head. "No, that's not what I mean," she said. "In the Irish Sullivan is *Súilleabháin*. It means one-eyed."

We all looked at Mary Margaret. "What?" she asked. "Did I say something wrong?"

"One-eyed," I said. "Sullivan."

"I'll be damned," Joop said. "I'll be damned and dipped in chocolate."

Kathleen turned to Joop. "What did Skeets say Tully's last words were?"

"He said Tully said something he couldn't understand," Joop said. "Spoke in another language is what he said. And then Tully told him, 'It was that one-eyed bastard.'"

"And Tully spoke Gaelic, right?" Kathleen asked.

"Tully grew up in the Gaeltacht," Mary Margaret said. "In the west of Ireland. He learned his Irish as a boy. His Irish was grand. I had him in several times to talk to my class about growing up in..."

"Could Tully have been speaking to Skeets in Gaelic?" Kathleen asked. "He was badly hurt... he might have reverted to the language he learned as a child. He might have been saying..."

"It was Sullivan," I said.

The three of us sat quietly for a moment.

Mary Margaret looked at us. "I've no idea what's going on," she said. "But I'm thinking lunch is over."

We spent a couple of days building a case against Tim Sullivan,

examining it from every angle before taking it to Marty Coyle. Marty was skeptical, but he was a good enough cop to realize he needed to talk to Sullivan.

A couple of tough questions, though, and Sullivan cracked like a piñata. He was sick with guilt, truth be told, and was relieved to get it out.

It was all about money, of course. It so often is. Not the piddling amounts of cash taken in the robberies but the big wads of money waiting to be made. The money that would come by turning an out-dated bucket-of-blood saloon into the sort of bar that fit the new ambience of the neighborhood. The money that would come from serving perfect pints of Guinness stout to writers and artists and the decent, employed people who could afford them.

Kinsella had kept the saloon as a sort of memento of days gone by. That bar and that neighborhood, for him, were fixed in the past... a point in time when he'd been a young scrapper working a rough joint among rough men. That was how he'd always see it.

Sullivan, though, recognized the changes in the neighborhood and knew the saloon was a potential gold mine. He'd been trying to buy it from Kinsella for over two years. Kinsella, not needing the money, had been reluctant to sell. So Sullivan had decided to encourage him. He'd begun small—skimming profits, doing minor acts of vandalism, faking small burglaries. Profits fell and insurance rates went up. But still Kinsella hung onto the



saloon. So Sullivan escalated from fake burglaries and vandalism reports to false reports of robbery.

The first time had been absurdly easy. He told the police a man wearing a ski mask and carrying a pistol came in after the last customer left and robbed him of the daily receipts. The police, he discovered, were as locked into their image of Kinsella's Saloon as Kinsella himself. They expected that sort of thing at Kinsella's and didn't investigate the robberies very hard.

So he did it three more times, each time telling the same basic story. He was afraid, however, to push his luck by claiming to be the victim of a fifth robbery. Instead, he'd decided to actually rob Tully.

He'd stolen the gun from McTaggart's car months ago . . . not because he'd been planning the robbery but because he was afraid McTaggart might someday get drunk and angry enough to shoot somebody. Sullivan didn't mind faking a few robberies to convince Kinsella the saloon was more trouble than it was worth, but he didn't want anybody to get hurt.

Robbing Tully would be simple, he'd thought. He'd often told Tully never to confront a robber. Just hand over the cash, he'd said, and let the police deal with it. Sullivan figured he wouldn't even need to speak. He'd point the gun at Tully, gesture toward the cash register, fire a warning shot if necessary, and walk out with the cash. He'd be a few hundred bucks richer, the saloon would be a few hundred bucks poorer, and maybe it would finally

convince Kinsella to sell the place. Simple.

But Tully hadn't been as frightened by the gun as Sullivan expected. And the warning shot into the bottles behind the bar had gone disastrously wrong. Sullivan had been shocked when Tully fell. He'd gone behind the bar to see if he could help and seen Tully's expression change as Tully recognized his voice.

Sullivan panicked. He snatched the money and ran.

He'd been right about one thing, though. The robbery did finally convince Kinsella to sell the saloon. He sold it to his son, the one who'd made him rich off internet stocks. The old saloon is now Kinsella's InterCoffee, a coffeeshop with computer stations and Internet access. It's very popular, and there's talk of its becoming a regional chain.

Mike McTaggart was released after spending a week or so in jail. Nobody apologized to him for arresting him for a crime he didn't commit. He threatened to sue the police department but never did. Eventually he moved north to the border of Maine and New Hampshire, where he found work as a welder in a shipyard.

Skeets is still on the streets, still diligently recording his meals and trying to cadge a few bucks off strangers.

Tim Sullivan hired a good lawyer and plea-bargained the murder charge down to negligent homicide. He's doing a stretch at the state prison in Walpole, where you can't get a decent pint of Guinness to save your life. □

CAPTAIN BINH AND THE BIDJI

Gary Alexander



“**G**uess what, superintendent!”
Bamsan Kiet shut his eyes.

Guess what?

From the lips of Captain Binh, who had burst into Kiet's office at Hickorn Police Headquarters, it was an innocuously leading question that was perhaps not a question at all and certainly not innocuous.

Kiet knew that he would be pleased with neither question nor answer. He was superintendent of police of Hickorn, capital of the mythical Kingdom of Luong. Since his milieu was imaginary, the question-answer was doubtlessly bizarre. Stretching the envelope of credibility, in Binh's vernacular.

“What, captain? What?”

“There's been a homicide at the Petit Vee,” Binh said excitedly. “We gotta boogie right on over.”

Kiet closed his eyes again. Luong had been a French colony until it won independence in 1954. Known as the Fourth Indochina, the kingdom had been overseen by a French governor general. Located on a fringe of downtown Hickorn, the official residence was a stone and glass monolith inspired by the palace at Versailles. Though somewhat smaller, it was just as architecturally busy.

The French went away, but the derisive nickname remained. The structure became a white elephant, for decades an unwanted orphan neglected by the government. Two years ago, thanks to a development grant from a western foundation, the Petit Vee was transformed into

the Hickorn Trade and Convention Center.

As far as Kiet was concerned, this largesse was the result of bureaucrats' having too much time and money on their hands. Luongan trade was minimal, and most conventioners chose to behave badly elsewhere. But there was something going on at the Petit Vee. Kiet could not recall what.

“Superintendent? Yo.”

Kiet sighed and stood up. The fact that he did not exist did not excuse him from doing his duty. He followed Binh outside and into a rattletrap Renault hatchback, HPD's sole four-wheeled vehicle. Binh's kamikaze driving had dispatched previous staff cars to the scrap heap.

“Details, please,” Kiet reluctantly ordered.

Binh gave it the gas and shuddered out of the lot, pumping blue exhaust fumes into the humid sky. The vehicle was offensive to occupants and passersby alike, and an accomplished bicyclist could outpace it.

“Don't have much hard info yet, superintendent. Bottom line is, the victim is an unidentified American. Our men are on the scene. I've ordered the Petit Vee buttoned up tighter than a drum.”

Kiet did not hazard a translation of the last sentence.

“Sergeant Li and his boys oughta have something for us, but I think we've got a bigtime mystery to solve.”

Kiet suppressed a groan. Luongan murders were not supposed to be “mysteries” replete with Binh's

"perps" and "skells" and "modi operandi," and they usually weren't. Hickornian killers were blood-drenched spouses and business rivals drunkenly boasting and/or weeping at the nearest bar.

Captain Binh had trained in police science for one year at the United States of America's District of Columbia gendarmerie. During the day he had studied unavailable technology and irrelevant statutes. At night yellow-haired women, V-8 powered automobiles, and brewpubs further corrupted him.

"There is a function at the Petit Vee, yes?"

"Yeah. The Bidji Expo."

"Of course." Bidji, a virulent weed peculiar to Luong, had been the subject of recent attention.

"I love a good mystery element in a case, superintendent. A challenge."

Kiet ignored the absurdity. "This exposition, if I recall—the purpose is to award bidji licenses for harvesting and planting from seed we export."

"Right. The Ministry of Agriculture is orchestrating this dog and pony show, and somebody's gonna pay through the nose. You remember how the bidji furor started?"

"Vaguely."

"Well, some American agricultural researchers—University of California postdoc professional students on a research grant—came to Luong to see if you could eradicate the stuff. They can grow damn near everything in California. That's a known fact."

"As any Luongan is aware, bidji really sucks. It grows in the dry

season and in the monsoons. It chokes out crops, especially rice. Farmers hate it with a passion."

"Is it true that bidji grows exclusively in Luong?"

"Yeah. Go figure how we have such luck. Anyhow, their game plan was to toast the bidji without poisoning the crops, but bidji's like cockroaches and dandelions. You could nuke it and it'd survive, which led them to continue milking the grant by trying to find a use for it. Did they ever?"

"Yes, I recall," Kiet said.

"Ever try bidji, superintendent?"

In fact he sort of had, out of curiosity, paying a dear price at the Central Market for a quarter kilo of a substance less than worthless a few weeks earlier. Kiet lived alone in a small villa with his nameless cat. The bidji looked like sawdust and smelled rancid. Kiet poured some on the cat's plate. He had never seen the animal refuse any food or drink, but it sniffed the bidji once and walked away. The cat was a borderline alcoholic and often drank Golden Tiger beer from a saucer while Kiet enjoyed his from the bottle. Kiet mixed the cat's favorite beverage with the bidji and received for his effort a hiss.

If the noxious creature shunned bidji, Kiet was not about to hazard a taste. The superintendent was not young. His mortality had been weighing on him of late, both disturbing and shaming him.

"No, captain, I haven't," he said, only half lying.

"They discovered that bidji was healthy, and healthy's an understatement, superintendent."

Kiet clenched his eyelids as his adjutant slalomed the Renault between a pedicab and a cluster of pedestrians.

"Bidji's chock full of vitamins and minerals, and it keeps you regular, too," Binh went on. "Arguably, bidji is nature's most nearly perfect food. According to studies, bidji blows away oat bran and various vitamin supplements in terms of lowering cholesterol and fighting off cancer. The findings were released the same week in the *New England Journal of Medicine* and the *National Enquirer*."

"Scholarly publications?"

"You betcha. We're talking serious media overload, so the powers that be have given top priority to keeping the bidji in country. They're training bidji-sniffing dogs out at Hickorn International."

Burma, China, Laos, and Thailand girded landlocked Luong. The only practical way in and out of the kingdom was up.

Kiet said, "A sensible precaution. Who, then, has flocked to Hickorn for our bidji?"

Binh ticked them off on his fingers. "You have your nutrition gurus, you have your vitamin manufacturers, you have your various entrepreneurs, you have your informal hustlers, and naturally, you have your breakfast cereal companies."

The last time Kiet would care to eat the wretched crud was first thing in the morning. "Why breakfast cereal manufacturers?"

"Simple. What they do when they produce cereal in America, they scrub the natural nutrients off the

whole grain and coat it with sugar and honey and chocolate and fake fruit flavors so kids will eat it. Then they add vitamins so if their teeth fall out it'll be from decay, not scurvy. Oat bran changed the rules. They hyped oat bran cereals as life-savers until Uncle Sam slapped their hands for false advertising, but the public was hooked. Mom and Dad were eating cereal with the kiddies to unclog their arteries and their bowels. The American public believes you can eat sixty percent salt and sugar so long as it has oat bran, too. Along comes bidji, a major, major improvement to oat bran."

"Captain, please grip the steering wheel."

Binh complied with one hand, rubbing thumb and index finger together with the other. "Mucho dinero, superintendent. Jungle drums say Agriculture's playing both ends against the middle, jacking up the price into a winner-take-all situation. If that's not the motive, I'll eat my hat."

The patent leather brim alone would make quite a meal, Kiet thought. His lean young adjutant was, as always, immaculate in his white uniform. Gold captain's pips gleamed like nuggets on his shoulder boards. Kiet was an utter contrast. Twice Binh's age and weight, he was not immaculate in his customary sandals, slacks, and white shirt.

They rode in silence the rest of the way to the Hickorn Trade and Convention Center. While the building and the grounds were minuscule in comparison to the

real Versailles, Kiet regarded the compound as bombastic. Hickorn was a flat and steamy riverfront city of a quarter million. The three story block of sooty gingerbread seemed to him absurdly out of scale. He was old enough to realize that this was exactly what his former French masters had in mind.

Binh got out of the Renault and said, "If you ask me, this place could use a little pizzazz, some color, maybe some neon. I heard that a chunk of the restoration money vamoosed to parts unknown, which is how come it was done on the cheap."

Kiet detected ample color, thank you. The yellow crime scene tape with which Binh was so infatuated streamed across the towering entry arch. The Petit Vee appeared to be gift-wrapped.

Sergeant Li, the officer in charge, saw his superiors and scrambled out to them as if fleeing a fire. A stocky man whose musculature spoke for itself, Li's temperament normally ranged between stoic and statuelike. Not a good sign, Kiet thought.

"Am I glad to see you," he breathlessly told Binh.

"What's cookin'?" Binh asked.

"Minister of Agriculture Vo is a whirling dervish."

"Never mind Vo," Binh said. "What happened?"

Li consulted a pocket notebook. "The DOA is Elihu (Chip) Jackworth IV."

Binh whistled.

"Pardon me?"

"Jackworth Tobacco is one of the biggies. Jackworths has been a top-selling smoke for eons. You see its

logo plastered all over racecars. Chip Jackworth was the last of a long, long line. Elihu the First formed the company a century and a half ago. I read that he died of a broken heart when slavery was abolished."

"Jackworth was desiring to manufacture bidji cigarettes?"

"No, no, superintendent. Jackworth has a humongous breakfast cereal subsidiary. Americans pick on their tobacco companies. They sue them right and left. Bidji cereal would be super p.r. It'd be the most revolutionary advance in cereal technology since pastel marshmallow chunks."

Binh had seldom been so inscrutable. Kiet said, "Sergeant Li, the facts of the murder, please."

"Many of the participants were attending a cocktail party hosted by Minister Vo in the main downstairs drawing room. Gunfire sounded upstairs. Some ran up to investigate. A third floor conference room was locked from the inside. A caretaker was summoned. He had to remove the lock assembly to gain entry. Mr. Jackworth was found dead, a single gunshot wound to the back of the head."

"A locked conference room mystery," Binh said. "Way cool."

"While people gathered around the corpse, a man was spotted sneaking out of a hallway utility closet, carrying a pistol. Several men overpowered and disarmed him. We have him in custody. The weapon was still warm."

"Essentially a smoking gun situation," Binh said.

"Who is the captured man?"

"His name is Richie Ralf, and he is a—"

"Wow. Likewise a giant player," Binh interrupted. "Ralf owns RichieRalf.com. Ralf's losing a fortune selling stuff on the Internet, and he's worth a king's ransom."

Kiet did not ask Binh to explain the contradiction. "Has he confessed?"

"He requests an attorney."

Kiet groaned. Lawyers did not infest Luong as they had the West, but they were reaching the nuisance stage.

"Goes with the territory, superintendent. Rich people lawyer up about any piddly little thing," Binh said.

Li said, "My men are attempting to take statements from those gentlemen who are willing to speak to us."

"Uh-oh. Here comes bad news," Binh said.

Minister of Agriculture Tedok Vo strode out of the Petit Vee toward them, trailing crime scene tape he had pushed through. In his late thirties, he was as circular as he was tall, and he wasn't very. Vo wore his thinning hair slicked straight back; the goo used to adhere it in place tended to stripe the top of his head in alternating rows of hair and scalp. He wore a blue suit, white shirt, and navy tie, what Kiet knew to be the uniform of an American socioeconomic cult known as Wall Street Republican.

Li gulped. "There's something else, Superintendent Kiet. I'll let him tell you."

"Why is Vo bad news, captain?"

"A buddy of mine is a deputy as-

sistant undersecretary in Ag. He says Vo's gotten into the New Age thing."

"What is the harm of a quasi-religion?" Kiet said.

"It's made him super weird."

"How so?"

"Well, for one thing he's a hugger."

Li and Binh were quick enough to subtly avoid the agriculture minister. Kiet was not.

"Thank goodness you're here, Kiet," Vo said, puffing from the effort.

"Good afternoon to you, too, Mr. Minister," Kiet said, pushing back from the embrace.

Vo swept a pudgy arm toward the Hickorn Trade and Convention Center. "Horrible. An utter tragedy."

"We shall pursue the investigation until we apprehend the wrongful party," Kiet said.

"I've saved you the trouble, Superintendent Kiet. An investigation is unnecessary. My staff and I have determined that Mr. Jackworth's tragic death was the result of a suicide."

"*Ay, caramba!*" Binh said.

"A fascinating theory," Kiet said. "Perhaps a Mr. Richie Ralf facilitated his suicide?"

"Please don't be cynical," Vo said. "Nobody was in that locked room with Chip when the gun was fired. Richie was ill. He wasn't at the cocktail party. He happened to discover the gun and pick it up. Some of the other fellows overreacted. We can assume someone else initially found the body and took the gun away in panic. All I require from the police is to remove the body and do the appropriate paperwork. My

office will notify his next of kin and the Jackworth Corporation."

Kiet thanked the minister for his cooperation and said they would be as expedient as possible.

"Vo thinks he's above the law," Binh mumbled to Kiet as employees swung open slablike wooden doors that outweighed the HPD Renault.

Tedok Vo possibly *was* above the law, Kiet thought. He had never worked on a farm. Most likely he had never set foot on one. His appointment to this post was the result of family clout and attendance at a university in the American grain province of Nebraska.

"The New Age conversion," Kiet said. "Please explain."

"Well, according to my buddy, some people Vo'd known in college passed through last year on their way to a retreat run by some swami in Katmandu. Vo went along for the ride. He'd just gone through his latest divorce. My buddy figured midlife crisis. At this retreat they did channeling, crystals, the whole goofy nine yards. Vo was hooked. They say the swami visits Vo in Luong, though maintaining a low profile."

"Is this significant?"

"You mean, like, right now, in the context of this situation? Maybe, superintendent. He's highly conflicted. He still dresses square, but his head's orbiting a different planet. My buddy says instead of taking a siesta Vo meditates, chanting a mantra. At the ministry they used to know what was on his mind, which wasn't much. Now they haven't got a clue."

They entered to the loud purr of air conditioning and an arctic chill. Removed from the balmy ninety degrees and ninety percent humidity, Kiet's arms erupted as if he had contracted a pox.

"That feels fabulous," Binh said, fanning himself. "The one thing the government didn't scrimp on in the rehab of this dump is the a.c."

The floor and walls were composed of marble and granite, two minerals not indigenous to the Kingdom of Luong. The hard, glossy stone made the place seem even colder. Kiet resisted hugging himself.

Grotesque crystal chandeliers with missing bulbs cast spotty light on dark wood furnishings. Bright signs and banners proclaiming BIDJI EXPO dispelled gloom neither in the stolid environment nor on florid Caucasian faces.

He guessed there were roughly fifteen to twenty guests, all male. Most wore HELLO, MY NAME IS _____ badges and expressions that ranged from boredom to distress. Kiet had difficulty placing these powerful Western magnates in such a dreary setting. Evidently bidji was as important as Binh had stated.

Sergeant Li led them upstairs. On a table opposite the third floor landing, flanked by stacks of Bidji Expo programs, a potted bidji plant sat shrinelike. Variegated leaves of green, purple, and brown bushed out around a spiky flower head. At maturity the dull blossoms would fall, revealing seed clusters—the miraculous bidji. It looked to Kiet like a bouquet arranged by a de-

mented florist. Binh took a program.

"Our men are detaining Richie Ralf in the meeting room at the end of the hall," said Sergeant Li.

"Superintendent, we'd better go check out the body first," Binh said.

"Of course," Kiet said.

Bamsan Kiet's deepest secret was his aversion to blood and gore. Should he faint at the sight of the deceased Elihu (Chip) Jackworth IV, the word would be out that the nation's ranking law enforcement officer was a sissy. He would be finished, to the lowliest sneak thief an ineffectual joke.

The conference room door was thick, almost petrified, hardwood. A hole gaped where the lockset had been. Police officers surrounded a sheet-covered form on the floor. Kiet turned his attention to the garish flocked wallpaper; to the marble fireplace that in Luong could only be ornamentation (yet wood smoldered on andirons behind glass panels); to the bolted french doors that opened to a balcony.

Binh knelt and lifted the sheet. "Superintendent, looky here."

Kiet fuzzed his eyes out of focus.

"How come you're squinting?"

"I am gleaming mystery clues."

"The stiff's semistiff, superintendent. Bigtime rigor's setting in. Too bad we don't have a budget for a pathology lab. See the entry wound? From the back, at the base of the skull, angled upward. There's no stippling, so the barrel wasn't pressed against the skin. That's a damn good trick for a suicide. Jackworth's a long tall drink of water, but he'd have to be double-jointed

and have super long arms. We're definitely stretching the envelope of credibility."

"Agreed."

"Hey, looky *here*." The victim was facedown. Binh removed an object from beneath him—a cellular telephone. "He had a death grip on it."

Kiet considered the burgeoning presence of cellular telephones in Hickory a pestilence. Yupsters walked the streets with the devices grafted to their ears. They chirped constantly as if a locust swarm.

"He was perhaps telephoning his suicide note," Kiet said.

"When pigs can fly."

"Or summoning help."

Binh clipped the telephone to his belt. "A serious chitchat with Richie Ralf is in order, superintendent."

An officer guarding the room where Ralf was being held had the murder weapon in a plastic bag. Binh removed the small revolver, hefted it, and said, "A Saturday night special. A piece of garbage."

Kiet disliked all firearms, particularly cheap unreliable ones. He did not carry one lest he be encouraged to use it. He sniffed. "It has been fired recently."

"Yeah, and thanks to our boy Ralf, fingerprints aren't an issue," Binh said, breaking open the cylinder and ejecting all six cartridges. "Four live rounds, two casings. One slug's in Jackworth. Where's the second?"

Richie Ralf was a boy, Kiet observed from the doorway. He had unkempt hair, thick glasses, and bloodshot eyes. Adolescent blemishes dotted a soft, round face.

An austere bearded man in a

white robe and turban sat across the conference table from Ralf.

"An excellent question. I have another. Who's Mr. Ralf's companion?"

"Minister Vo insisted, superintendent. The gentleman is the minister's spiritual adviser," said the officer. "His name is Blabferstan Singh."

"Must be the swami," Binh said. "He's got guru written all over him."

"This lad is a millionaire?" Kiet asked.

"Hell, superintendent, he's a *billionaire*, at least on paper. And he started out like three years ago in his parents' garage."

Neither Richie Ralf nor Blabferstan Singh reacted when Kiet and Binh sat down at the table. Kiet made introductions and said, "In your own words, please, Mr. Ralf, tell us what you know."

"Tedok said I oughtta have my lawyers," Ralf said.

Lawyers in the plural. Kiet suppressed a moan. He had finally broken Binh of reading suspects their Miranda rights, a pesky, nonsensical habit he had imported from America. "Mr. Ralf, lawyers tend to be underfoot in a crime investigation."

"Still."

"Hey, this is Luong, baby," Binh said.

"Mr. Vo's friend, perhaps he can substitute," Kiet said.

Blabferstan Singh nodded and smiled beatifically.

"Cat's got his tongue," Ralf said. "Tedok said he'd be a comfort. He hasn't said a word, which I guess isn't all bad."

"In Luong the acquisition of an attorney is not necessarily an admission of guilt," Kiet said, fluttering a palm. "But it does suggest that the facts require distortion."

"Well, I was kinda under the weather, Montezuma's Revenge or something, so I didn't make Tedok's cocktail party," Richie Ralf immediately began. "Me and the others, we were staying in hotel suites or private villas, but Tedok said to go ahead and crash in here on this couch till I felt better, okay? I'm about half asleep when I hear this slamming and running on steps and I'm thinking I'm, you know, dreaming, so I go into the hall shaking away the cobwebs. There's a racket in that conference room. I see something on the floor in this closet, you know, and I go in and there's this gun that's just been fired: I go whoa, and I'm holding the thing wondering what to do and I walk out and am seriously pounced upon by all these dudes."

Bamsan Kiet's English was serviceable. Ralf spoke fast, and Kiet caught the gist, though not the nuances. Binh absorbed each word. Kiet deferred the interrogation to him.

"When did you last see Chip Jackworth alive?"

"It blew my mind, man. I mean, I didn't know till they told me. When? Let's see. Lunch, I think." He patted a rubbery midsection. "Could've been that shrimp that did me in."

"You and Chip didn't have problems?"

"Nope."

"Did he act suicidal?"

"No way, but you never know. Tedok said he blew his brains out."

"Did you get along with Chip?" Binh asked.

"Sure. You just asked me. Everybody was cool with everybody."

"Despite the competition for the bidji?" Kiet said.

"Sounds like there was enough to go around," Richie Ralf replied. "It was an issue of specific rights for cultivating and marketing. Tedok took us on a field trip yesterday. Man, you guys are inundated with the stuff!"

Minister of Agriculture Vo came in, steepled his fingers at his chin, and bowed. The swami rose and returned the gesture.

"Am I free to go?" Richie swiveled his head at everyone. "I want to head on home. I have a business to run, you know."

Kiet thought it was not his billion-dollar enterprise he missed but his mother. "Is the investigation not yet completed?" Vo asked.

Kiet said, "Almost."

"Yeah," Binh said. "Soon."

"Mr. Minister," Kiet said, "may we have a private word?"

In the hallway he asked, "Sir, who is your associate?"

"Blabferstan Singh is director of the Scientific Institute for Transcendental Spirituality. I met him during a trip. Director Singh and his teachings have changed my life. It is fortuitous that he is in Hickorn to assist us in this difficult and tragic circumstance."

"Splendid," Kiet said. "We were mildly curious why he was in the room with Mr. Ralf."

"Serenity, Kiet. Director Singh

emanates serenity. His presence is doing wonders for Richie's state of mind."

"Of course," Kiet said.

"Yeah," Binh concurred. "He's not what you'd call a motor mouth."

"However, your director is not part of the official investigation," Kiet said.

"Oh but he is. Director Singh was with me when I saw Chip's body. It was he who made the suicide determination."

"Through a pathological determination?" Kiet asked.

"No, his techniques transcend police methods. He detected harsh residues of karmic force fields that indicated Chip took his own life."

"Are these fields visible?"

"Not for the majority of us who have not ascended to his plane of enlightenment."

"Kind of like humans not being able to hear a dog whistle?" Binh offered.

Vo glared at Binh, then Kiet. "Superintendent Kiet, I demand that you conclude in the very near future or I shall have to exercise my influence with your superiors."

When Vo was out of earshot, Binh said, "You swallow any of that karma crapola?"

"No, thank you. Captain, you stated that young Richie Ralf was a billionaire who was losing a fortune. Please clarify."

"Well, you know the Internet."

"As vaguely as I can."

"Luong's not what you'd call wired, but the Net's coming. See, RichieRalf.com sells things online, kinda like space age mail order. He loses money on whatever he sells,

and he's breaking sales records right and left."

"The less successful he is, the more successful he is?"

"You got it. His fortune's in company stock, which is going through the ceiling. Internet stocks sell like hotcakes, and RichieRalf.com is one of the trendiest."

"So if he secures rights to our bidji, he can market bidji products and dramatically increase sales, which will dramatically increase his losses. His stock value will soar higher, and he will be even richer?"

"That's the bottom line, superintendent. But he didn't do it."

"I concur."

"Richie doesn't have a mean bone in his body, and he's a dork who couldn't park a bicycle straight. So who?"

"Perhaps the party the deceased was telephoning would assist us. Can we identify who it is?"

"Good idea." Binh took off the cellular phone and played with the buttons. "Can do. See the screen? I recalled the last number called. I'm punching SEND, and away we go."

Binh stated his name and position, the number of Chip Jackworth's telephone, and said, "The U.S.A., superintendent. Awesome. I just dialed halfway around the world."

Binh and his giddy adoration of technology. Kiet said, "Yes, amazing. Where, please, and to whom?"

"I'm not sure. I can look up the area code, 704, and try him later. Some guy named Jeff Bob Jones. I got his voice mail. In the States it's nighttime, yesterday or tomorrow, I can never keep straight which."

Police officers rolled the body out on a gurney. Kiet waved Sergeant Li over.

"Have any of the conventioners volunteered information?"

"Prospective witnesses are reluctant," Li said. "Beyond claiming total ignorance, they refuse to respond."

"Nobody wants to upset the ol' apple cart," Binh said. "They're still hoping to grab a piece of the bidji action."

Kiet and Li looked at him.

Li said, "One gentleman is willing to speak to you gentlemen if it can be done discreetly."

"Hey, discreetly's my middle name," Binh said. "Who's our stoolie?"

Li referred to his notebook. "President of a vitamin company. His name is Vance Powell."

Binh referred to his Bidji Expo program. "Powell's a fitness and vitamin guru, heavily into infomercial huckstering."

Kiet peeked over his shoulder.

"Well, not in so many words, superintendent. I'm reading between the lines."

Li went downstairs to arrange their discreet meeting. Unimpeded now by the aftermath of unspeakable violence, Kiet perused the murder scene. He peered into the fireplace. Reduced to gray embers, the logs glowed red in their centers.

"Forget a Santa Claus situation, superintendent. You'd have the mother of all hotseats. A bit ostentatious, don't you think? Keeping fires burning and the a.c. cranked up full bore. They're doing it in the

rooms with fireplaces, and there're plenty of those. I guess it's Vo's way of showing that Agriculture has money to throw around, too."

"Do they?"

"Damn good question. Vo's banking on a fat and juicy return on the bidji."

Kiet pointed to folding chairs stacked in a corner. "For their conferences, I presume. What were the topics?"

"According to the program, mostly seminars on agricultural and economic issues. They sound like snoozers."

Kiet tried the balcony doors. They had been painted shut decades ago and wouldn't budge. He looked around.

"Give it up, superintendent. No one could get in or out, not even a mouse."

"Except through the main door."

"Which was locked from the inside," Binh said, flicking the latch of worn brass that had refastened. "A deadbolt separate from the outside lock. This hardware must be original. It's as old as the hills."

"Elihu (Chip) Jackworth IV locked himself in this room, placed a telephone call to a Jeff Bob Jones in America, and terminated the conversation by shooting himself in the back of the head, upon which a phantom witness entered the locked room, exited with the weapon, and deposited it on the closet floor."

Binh sighed. "Yeah, yeah, I know. We're up to our eyeballs in guano. What *isn't* wrong with this picture?"

"We shall consult the caretaker.

Perhaps he can explain magic tricks."

Sergeant Li came in. "Mr. Vance Powell will see you in the alley for a few minutes. He is nervous."

"A potential aggravated murder-one rap, and citizen cooperation is like pulling teeth," Binh grumbled in the rear stairwell.

"Not citizens," Kiet reminded him. "They are foreigners."

An excessively muscular and suntanned Caucasian of approximately thirty-five stood in an alcove, partly obscured by a Dumpster. His arms were folded, swelling his forearms even further, to the dimensions of Popeye, the American cartoon hero.

"Steroid City," Binh muttered. "And he must live in a tanning parlor."

"The fuzz," Vance Powell said, proffering them business cards. "You fellas watch late-night TV?"

"No," Kiet said.

Vance Powell's skin was darker than his hair and eyes. "You probably don't get me on your local boob tube anyway. We've just introduced a supplement program designed strictly for guys. It's designed to turbocharge your love life. We can't ship it fast enough. If you're interested, I'll send you a trial package."

Offended by Powell's wink, Kiet said no thank you and refused the card. Bachelor Binh grabbed his.

Powell said, "Make this fast, guys. I need to maintain a low profile. I am not involved. *Not.*"

"It's your nickel," Binh said. "Go."

"Lunchtime. A catered seafood spread. Chip left early. He was expecting a call. We all have major re-

sponsibilities and keep in close touch, but whenever I saw Chip today, he had a phone pressed to his ear."

"I am aware of the phenomenon," Kiet said.

"I figured there was trouble, it would be them," Powell continued.

Binh asked, "Friction?"

"Not that you'd notice, though those two were different from the typical Expo invitee. Jackworth Tobacco could buy and sell us all. Richie is a nerdish kid and the second richest. It was coming down to those two for the bidji. Too rich for my blood. I know damn well Tedok Vo brought the rest of us in as rabbits."

"Excuse me?" Kiet said.

"In a distance race a rabbit sets a blistering pace to push the favorite to a record, then drops out. We were there to raise the stakes."

"I thought the bidji rights were to be apportioned piecemeal."

"Me too," Powell said, smirking bitterly. "Tedok's a tricky little rascal. He realized something we didn't but should've. When deep deep deep pockets bid up the price, the sum's a helluva lot greater than the parts. He changed the rules of the ballgame in the fourth quarter. That's basically what I wanted to tell you."

"Doing your civic duty," Binh said, returning his smirk.

"We were bamboozled." Powell rippled as he shrugged. "I had dreams of integrating the stuff in time-release capsules. Turbocharge and augment with bidji, and you'd never have to worry that your pump gives out on you in the bou-

doir. A level playing field's all I ever ask for."

"When did you last see Vo?"

Vance Powell paused to think. "We heard a loud bang. Vo was the one who said gunshot. To me it could've been a backfire or a boiler explosion. Acoustics are weird in this building. There aren't any.

"We're entrepreneurs. What do we know from guns? Tedok waddled up the steps, and we took off after him like the cavalry."

"Had Vo been at the luncheon earlier?"

Another rippling shrug. "Beats the hell out of me. I hear the bang and there he is. I knew it was over except the shouting, so I concentrated on feeding my face."

Using the dead man's telephone as they walked, Binh called the Hickory telephone company and learned that area code 704 was a portion of North Carolina, an American tobacco province.

"Probably Jackworth's home office," Binh said.

They located the caretaker's office-shop in a dusty, moldy corner of a half basement. The caretaker was in, and his name was Duong. He looked to Kiet like Ho Chi Minh, although older. In shorts and undershirt he sat on a workbench. Perspiration glistened on parchment skin.

Duong jabbed a gnarled digit at a stack of kindling and split logs, an axe leaning against it.

"They have made a peasant woodchopper out of me," he complained. "That is what I do for three solid days."

Kiet smelled alcohol breath. "You also removed door hardware to a room."

"That is a terrible thing. Why would a rich Westerner wish to do away with himself?"

"Whatever," Binh said. "Is it your job to tend the fires, too?"

"Who else?" he said, spreading bony arms. "I was a boy here, and the French tell me what to do. I dust cobwebs for years; now Luongans tell me what to do. They say tend fires, I tend fires."

"Jeez Louise, superintendent," Binh said. "A Luongan Quasimodo."

"When were you last in the room of the—suicide?"

"Hours ago, when I put in fresh wood." He flexed arthritic fists. "It is like iron to cut and burns a long time."

"Did you see anybody?"

"No. A meeting was ending. I had to wait for them to come out. Nobody stayed in the room."

"How many of the rooms can be locked from the inside?" Binh asked.

"The ones that were bedrooms, nine of them. The locks were installed for privacy."

"Who asked you to gain entry to the room?"

"The minister in charge of the conference sent someone for me. If I hadn't lost my key, I could have let them right in."

"The doors can be opened from the hallway when they are latched from the inside?"

"Not one hundred years ago when the Petit Vee was built. The mechanism is worn out. Soon you

will be able to unlock any Petit Vee lock with a lady's hairpin."

"When did you lose your key?"

Duong picked up a ring of keys from the bench and jangled it. "I don't know. Other keys are gone, too. I leave them here unless I have to go in somewhere, and I haven't had to lock or unlock that room for weeks. They restore the Petit Vee, they fix just what has already fallen apart, not what is going to fall apart next week."

"The air conditioning's first-rate, though," Binh said.

"Vo did it," Binh said in the alley. "He stole Duong's key when he was passed out from the sauce, or he had a skeleton key made. Whichever. The trajectory of his firing up at Chip, him seeming to always be at the wrong place at the time, the suicide hogwash, it all fits."

"I do not disagree," Kiet said.

"But what's his motive? Chip Jackworth was his most golden golden goose. Unless, that is, the wheels were about to come off the thing."

"Roughly interpreted, you are speculating that Jackworth was no longer interested in the bidji and possessed information that would dissuade the others from pursuing further negotiations?"

"Yeah, essentially. Maybe it turns out nature's most nearly perfect food ain't. Every single day in the States, superintendent, I kid you not, they come out with some new study on what's good for you and what isn't. Who knows? Somebody might've just discovered that bidji causes tumors in laboratory mice.

Maybe Jeff Bob Jones is the scientist who did. Bottom line is we can't establish Vo's exact whereabouts, and there are no witnesses. Not to mention that he has clout coming out of his ears."

"The closest we have to a witness is young Mr. Ralf," Kiet said.

"Yeah, and Richie heard, he didn't see. Superintendent, you have that faraway look you get when you're on the verge of a breakthrough."

"You said it, captain. He heard. He did not see. What precisely did he hear?"

"His words were, like, 'slamming and running on stairs.'"

"No gunshot?"

Binh made a pistol with his fingers. "I don't recollect 'bang.'"

"Nor I. Please join me in an experiment?"

"Cool," Binh said.

He had retrieved the revolver from the officer charged with its custody. Upon determining that the four live cartridges remained, he slapped the cylinder shut and twirled the shoddy, inexpensive weapon by the trigger guard.

Kiet hoped his adjutant hadn't noticed him flinch. He said, "One round is sufficient. When?"

"Two minutes."

Kiet descended to the second floor landing and waited. He glanced at his watch after two minutes, after three, after five. Though the majority of HPD officers and conventioners had departed, there was a normal sound level of conversation and footfalls.

He went up to the ill-fated con-

ference room and in to the acrid smell of gunpowder. Binh ejected six empty shells. "Sorry, superintendent. I got carried away. You didn't come so I, well, squeezed off extra rounds just in case, you know, you were distracted or it was loud near you and you didn't hear."

"I was not distracted, and it was not loud near me."

"Holy moly," Binh said. "If Richie Ralf a few meters away didn't hear a gunshot, Vo sure as hell didn't, at least not one from this room."

Kiet rapped on the door. "The Petit Vee is as solid as a tomb. Noise is muffled."

"Okay, then what went bang?"

"Perhaps the missing bullet from the murder weapon."

"Yeah, but the gun was across the hall."

"Captain, does a cartridge necessarily require a gun to, as you say, go bang?"

Binh smiled and snapped his fingers. "No, it does not. Nosirree."

Ten minutes later Kiet clutched a lump of twisted lead between the jaws of wrought-iron tongs. He and Binh gazed at it as if were the Star of India. The cellular phone clipped to Binh's belt chirped.

He unholstered it and said, "Good things come in pairs, superintendent. That's a known fact."

When Kiet and Binh rushed in on them, Tedok Vo, Blabferstan Singh, and Richie Ralf were at the table. Ralf was putting a pen to a contract.

"Don't sign your John Hancock to zilch till you listen up," Binh said.

Vo clasped Ralf's shoulder.

"Richie, ignore them and sign," he said. "They're trying to frame you for murder."

A dazed Richie Ralf laid down his pen.

Kiet tossed their mangled find on the table. "Once we theorized what you had done, Mr. Minister, we quickly recovered the missing sixth bullet. A glass panel covering the fireplace grate in the second former Petit Vee bedroom we entered had fresh cracks. Fortunately the bullet you threw into the fire didn't ricochet out when it blew up. Someone could have been hurt.

"The bedroom was one room removed from the landing. Presumably you left the door wide open. With the exception of Mr. Ralf and Mr. Jackworth, the conventioners were relishing a sumptuous meal. The explosion caught their attention."

"You boogied on down, materialized like the Pied Piper, and led the gang on up to your scenario," Binh said, pointing with the cell phone. "You whacked Chip and ditched the gun in that closet where Richie stumbled on it. That wasn't in your game plan, but hey, no harm, no foul, and it gave you an opportunity to do some bonding with Richie, who you definitely didn't want blamed. That'd mean bigtime rain on your parade."

Vo began to speak. He clamped his jaws shut when Richie picked up the pen.

"Call me Mr. Insensitive if you want," he said. "Chip's death and the bidji, you know, aren't they two separate issues?"

Singh smiled beatifically. Vo grinned and slapped his back. "You are absolutely correct, Richard."

Binh juggled the telephone. "Go ahead and sign if you like flushing your money down the toilet. You're buying diddly zip. The horse's out of the barn."

Richie said, "Are you shining me, man?"

Kiet gave up on a literal translation.

"Does the name Jeff Bob Jones ring a bell?"

Richie Ralf shook his head.

"Well, you can thank him, too, for saving you a wad of dough. Jones is farm editor for a North Carolina newspaper and a good buddy of Chip's. He was passing on a tidbit when there was a gunshot and the phone went dead. That's when Vo popped a cap in the base of his skull."

"You can't prove anything," Tedok Vo said.

"What's the bottom line?" Richie asked, suddenly appearing to Kiet years older.

"The bottom line is that there ain't no bottom line. Bottom line's gone bye-bye," Binh said. "Those professional students responsible for the bidji hoopla snuck several gunny sacks' worth out of Luong. They sold them to some gigantic California agribusiness for a carload of bread and retired. They can grow damn near anything in California. That's a known fact. The stuff's already a big hassle, choking out their other crops and clogging drainage ditches. As we speak, it's crowding in on Fresno, ruining lawns and gardens. You've got a

supply and demand situation where bidji rights are worth squat."

Richie Ralf tore up the contract. "I'm grateful, guys. Anything your police department needs, it's yours."

"You can't prove anything," Tedok Vo said glumly.

"You win some, you lose some," said Blabferstan Singh, rising to his sandaled feet.

"We cannot prove anything," Bamsan Kiet said glumly days later in his HPD office as he closed the Elihu (Chip) Jackworth IV file.

"Look on the bright side, superintendent. The scandal, the suspicion. The disgrace on account of blowing the bidji deal. Vo's family clout and money couldn't save his job. He's been demoted to Assistant Deputy Undersecretary of Agriculture and reassigned to remote villages to do studies on night soil.

"And Vo's guru buddy who was gonna get a nice cut for helping Vo stroke Richie, he's vamoosed. He's back in the hills enlightening pilgrims. The money's not as good, but it's steady."

Kiet visualized Vo wading in snake-infested rice paddies and managed a smile. "What is in the carton?"

"Just arrived," Binh said, removing a bottle of Powell's Turbo-charger Supplement. "Vance Powell came through with a trial package."

Kiet noticed that the cap seal had already been broken. "The larger item?"

Binh pulled out a box of Jackworth Bidji Flakes. "It just hit American supermarkets. Chip's legacy lives. Vance's note says they can't keep it on the shelves, and a half-dozen competing brands will be out before the end of the month along with multivitamins, including Vance's."

"Yes, yes, enough." Kiet dropped the plump folder in his out box.

"Case closed."

"Not quite."

"Excuse me?"

"Well, you remember that Richie Ralf was super grateful that we saved him a bundle."

"I do," Kiet said cautiously.

"He said whatever HPD needs, just ask."

"And you replied that we would think about it."

"Uh, yeah."

"And we agreed that you would write him and request either miscellaneous supplies or financing for a rudimentary pathology laboratory."

"Well, those were merely offhand suggestions. I felt I should, you know, increase his options."

Kiet groaned.

"Superintendent, do you know what an SUV is?"

"No."

"Sports utility vehicle. They're super popular in America. We can junk the Renault. Wanna know why and how come an SUV's perfect for us as a staff car?"

"No." Kiet closed his eyes. "No, I do not."

FICTION

HIS LADY FARE


Dan Crawford



Illustration by Linda Weatherly

Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 5/01

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One cloudy afternoon the wolf came to the edge of the woods and spotted a goat eating grass all alone in a field. Hunger rumbled in his stomach, but not enough to keep him from noticing those sharp, heavy heels that could kick the fangs from his jaw. She looked a young, healthy creature, too, and if she decided to run instead of kick, it would be a hard chase before he caught her.

Still, he thought, what kind of wolf am I if I can't win myself a lunch of goat?

He stepped forward, but instead of creeping quietly he strode across the grass without even trying to hide. "Oh, Goat!" he cried. "Oh, beautiful and superlative Goat! Oh, wonderful Goat!"

Turning, the goat saw the wolf and trembled all over. She thought of running, but the thought was born only to die. No one had ever called her beautiful or wonderful, and she didn't even know what superlative meant.

"What are you talking about?" she demanded, taking a step back.

The wolf's voice was one of breathless wonder. "I was walking through the woods—just checking to see if all the trees were still where they ought to be as we wolves do—and I saw a vision of loveliness the likes of which I had never before seen. Oh, Goat, you are the most beautiful creature in all the world! Marry me!"

This was exactly the last thing she had expected him to say. "Marry you?" she said, dazzled.

The wolf took a step forward and found she was not too dazzled to

pull back a few yards. "I cannot live without you! Without you by my side I shall waste away to nothing!"

The wolf sounded sincere.

"Really?" said the goat. "And you really want me to marry you?"

"Oh yes!" cried the wolf. "Why, only this morning my mother was telling me it was time I was married: a bachelor always has to wonder where his next meal is coming from, you know. If you will marry me, though, I need not worry about such things again! All I need is you to make my deepest wish come true!"

The goat felt something was lacking in this declaration, but the wolf's voice was so filled with strong feelings that she was quite won over. "Yes!" she shouted. "Oh yes! I will marry you! When?"

"Now!" cried the wolf, licking his lips. "I can't wait another moment!"

"What?" the goat demanded. "I haven't got a veil or a bouquet or any of the things one needs to get married."

The wolf sighed. Women! Still, if he could talk a goat into marrying him, he could probably also wait a little longer for his lunch. "In an hour, then," he suggested. "I can wait no longer than that! Meet me at the chapel by the spring."

"I will, oh, husband!" the goat promised, and pranced away across the field.

The wolf shrugged and went home. As long as he was at it, he put on his tuxedo and spats. He had always been the best-looking wolf in the woods, and one wouldn't want to look shabby, even at a false wedding.

He arrived early at the chapel, thinking of excuses that might serve to keep the goat from wanting to go inside. At times he thought he could just as well marry her before lunch, but then he'd have to pay for the ceremony.

An hour went by, and the goat did not appear. Another hour passed; the wolf wondered whether there had been a long line at the flower shop. The sun was going down when a fox stepped up to him

and handed him an envelope. Inside was a note from the goat.

"You talked about your worries and your next meal," she had written, "but I have met someone who thinks about me instead of himself. I am running away with the lion, who says that if I marry him I won't ever have to worry about *my* next meal."

The wolf believed this.

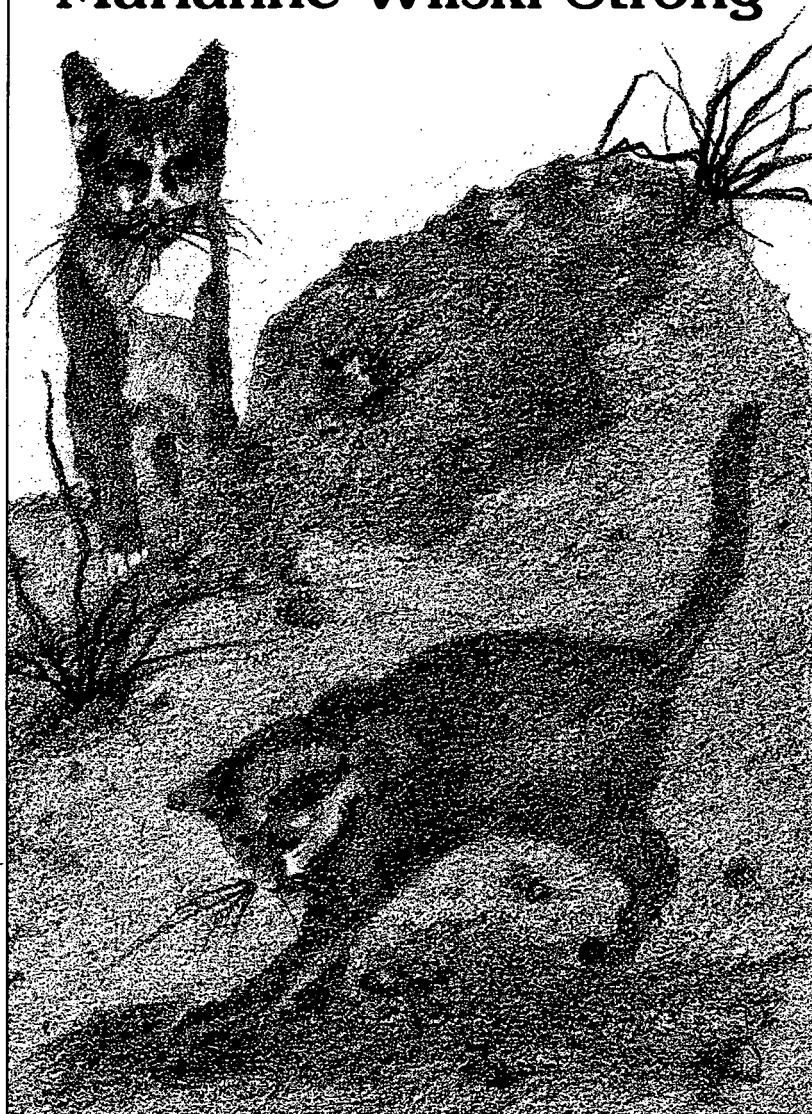
MORAL: There's always a bigger liar in the woods.

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FINE FOR LITTERING

Marianne Wilski Strong



Butch Peabody was killing cats up at St. Catherine's Assisted Living Manor.

Whenever one of the residents' pet cats wandered out into the open field bordering Butch's place, Butch came out with his shotgun and blasted the poor thing to kingdom come. Those were Sister Mary Leonard's words.

A contingent of assisted-living folks, headed by an incensed Sister Mary Leonard and calling themselves "the cat posse," demanded that Sheriff Stan Odyssek put Sister's words on the complaint form.

Stan persuaded them to let him write something more in line with official police language.

He had recorded the complaint and was about to take down the names of the complainants when Sister Mary Leonard's apparently thin supply of patience ran out.

Butch Peabody, she declared, wasn't worth a plugged nickel. He not only shot cats, he had abused his wife. Respect for truth compelled Sister Leonard to add that the wife had beaten him right back, breaking his arm in the process.

Stan asked how many cats had been shot. But Sister Mary Leonard was not yet finished with her catalogue of Butch's other sins, and Stan, a graduate of a Catholic high school, knew better than to interrupt again.

According to Sister Mary Leonard, Butch had a bad habit of selling cars, television sets, and lawn mowers he'd salvaged and repaired but in such a slipshod way that irate customers came flying up Three Mile Road at top speed, screeching into Butch's gravel driveway and catapulting out of their cars with language that left some of the more genteel residents of St. Catherine's in shock for days.

One customer, Sister Mary Leonard reported, had even gotten into an accident when the brakes Butch had supposedly repaired failed. The customer and his friend had almost been killed.

"We were hoping the customers would kill Butch," one of the cat posse said pleasantly. "But they didn't. Rumor had it they belonged to the Mafia. Don't you think they might be back?" she asked, petting the tabby cat that purred on her lap and looking at Stan for some encouragement.

Stan wondered aloud why no customers had reported Butch's slipshod ways.

"Because," Sister Mary Leonard said, "Butch Peabody entices people into illegal deals: cars with no title, tax-evading deals, and so on. At least that's the scuttlebutt. So no one turns Butch in for fear of revealing their own part in his illegal schemes."

"They're too chicken," a grayhaired woman said.

Another posse member, a hefty looking man of about seventy with iron gray hair on a full face worthy of a Medici, offered the opinion that

Butch should be shot and dumped into the Susquehanna River. "We can only hope Dorothy is right about the Mafia," he said, smiling at the woman with the tabby cat.

"Simon," Sister Mary Leonard said, giving the man a look that implied eternal damnation if he spoke again. "Sheriff—" she turned to Stan—"can you issue Butch Peabody a citation or some sort of formal warning about the cats?"

"Well, I can't do that without some evidence against him, but I'll give him a verbal warning."

"And tell him to clean up the junk he throws in the ditch by his barn," Simon muttered.

The next day Stan drove up Three Mile Road to Butch's farm, where he found Butch relaxing on his porch in a weathered wooden chair tipped back against a paint-peeled wall. Butch didn't bother to take his feet down from the porch railing.

He denied killing cats.

Even through the thick brown hairs of Butch's beard, liberally laden with bits of potato chip and somewhat damp with dribbles of Butch's brew, whose pungent smell drifted from the barn across the flotsam and jetsam of the yard, Stan could see the stubborn block of cynicism that constituted Butch's view of all humanity. Butch was the sort who lied with the defiance of the born liar, knowing his listener knew him to be lying and challenging the listener to call him a liar.

Stan looked over at the barn.

Butch laughed. "This isn't a dry county, sheriff. I can brew if I want to."

Stan nodded. "Right. I was just wondering if you have a proper license for fixing and selling cars."

Butch rolled forward, his feet slamming to the porch floor and sending up a low cloud of dust and dirt. "What're you talking about?"

Stan kept it nice and ambiguous.

"Just wondering if you know about the state and county rules regarding repairing old cars."

Butch stared. "Ain't no such thing."

"'Fraid there is, Butch." Stan squinted up at the sun, then looked round the yard. "Now, I'd sure hate to have to come back, poking round and disturbing your nice quiet farm life up here. So let's make sure I don't have any reason to do that." He turned and looked over at the neat grounds and structures of St. Catherine's Manor. Then he looked at the barn again. "Cats and cars can be trouble, Butch. You don't want to spend hunting season trapping the mice in the county prison."

"You threatening me, sheriff?"

Stan looked square at Butch. "Nope. Just guessing that you don't want any trouble. So let's see to it that there isn't any."

Butch rose, his skin turning a blotchy red. "Them damned old fogies is always looking for trouble. Their cats is always coming on my proper-

ty. I got a bum leg so's I can't work, and to boot I have to chase them kitties all the time. You keep them out of here, sheriff. I got rights, too. You keep them off my property."

"Yes, you do have rights, Butch. Any cats come wandering over here, Butch, you call me. I'll come and slap them with trespassing charges. Meantime you do your hunting on designated land. Don't give me an excuse to have to come back up here. I don't want to have to call in any IRS or welfare people."

Butch's eyes bugged out, but he said nothing.

Stan left, not sure he'd played it right. He'd guessed that Butch paid no income taxes on any earned money, and he'd guessed that Butch played the disability angle. If he were right and if he'd threatened Butch enough to keep him away from St. Catherine's, he'd be satisfied. He only hoped he hadn't angered Butch into taking some revenge. He'd have to tell Sister Mary Leonard to call him if she saw any signs of Butch on Manor property.

For three weeks all was quiet.

Then Sister Mary Leonard called Stan's office. Butch had ratcheted up the hostility. One of the residents, Mrs. Dorothy Shuba, whose tabby cat had disappeared a day earlier, had walked onto her patio to find the cat's body, beheaded, lying there.

Mrs. Shuba had had a heart attack.

"She's doing all right," Sister Mary Leonard told Stan, "but she'll be in intensive care for quite a while, and her heart has been damaged. All the members of the cat posse are very upset."

"Can you give me any evidence at all to pin this on Butch?"

Sister Mary Leonard paused for a considerable time. "No," she said. "I intended to manufacture some, but I don't think beheading a cat would be a serious enough crime to put Butch away. Can't you get him on some charge that will remove him for years?"

Stan promised to contact the IRS and the welfare people, but he knew that any action against Butch would take time.

The next morning Stan was about to go to talk to Butch again when two men came into the office to report him missing. They'd made plans to meet him at his camp in the woods the day before yesterday for some deer hunting. They'd gone up, but Butch wasn't there. He wasn't at his farm either.

One of the men agreed to accompany Stan to Toby's Woods and point out the location of the camp.

Forty-five minutes later Stan and his guide spotted Butch's van parked along a road cut years ago by a lumber company. The van was unmistakably Butch's. The mud flaps had silhouettes of suggestively posed women; the sides of the camper bore bumper stickers supporting all manner of violence from killing lawyers to giving government grants to the KKK.

Six feet to the right, in a small clearing in the pines, stood a fanbacked chair and Butch's tent listing to one side, its central pole bent over.

"Maybe Butch is inside," Stan suggested.

"Nope," Red Reilly said. "We already looked. Anyways, I looked. Stick-up was too yellow to look. 'Fraid he might see a body."

"Stickup?"

Red smiled. "We've called him that ever since you got him on that garage holdup four years ago. Wasn't nothin' but a prank."

Stan ignored Red's characterization of the crime. "Well, maybe Butch has returned. We'll look." He went over to the tent, hunched down, and looked inside. No Butch.

He stood up and pointed to the bent tentpole. "What happened here, any idea?"

"Stickup and me wondered, too."

Stan looked inside the tent again. An unzipped sleeping bag lay disheveled on the floor. Beside it were a battery-powered lantern, a girlie magazine, and a can of bug spray.

He turned his attention to the van. "Did you look inside?" he asked Red.

"Uh, nope. Well, I mean, we peeked in through a window. He's not in there."

Stan walked to the van and pulled on a door handle. The door slid open.

Butch had altered the inside of the van. He'd removed all but the front seat, leaving a space for whatever equipment he hauled to the woods.

Stan stepped inside and looked around. He lifted the top of a cardboard box. Inside were two flannel shirts, a pair of jeans, some underwear, gloves, and a rather moth-eaten sweater. The clothes appeared untouched since Butch had packed them.

Putting on his own gloves, Stan gingerly picked up a metal box. It was locked, but he had a pretty good idea that it contained Butch's extra ammunition.

He glanced round the van again. "Red," he called. "Come over here."

Red sauntered over, hands in his pockets, his eyes pasted on Stan.

"Which one of you took Butch's guns?"

"I don't know what . . ."

"Cut the crap, Red, or you'll be looking at charges ranging from theft to suspicion of murder."

Red rubbed a hand over his mouth and chin. "Murder?"

"Murder," Stan said, pretty sure he knew who had the guns and pretty sure that Red's thread of decency, the thread that had compelled him to report his friend's disappearance and to come up the woods with the sheriff, would force out the truth.

"But there ain't no body."

"Not yet."

Red turned white. "Look, sheriff. I ain't done nothing. Neither did Stickup. Except for taking the rifles. I told Stickup not to take them. I told him it wasn't a good idea. He said it was okay. He said we could just say we didn't see them. He . . ."

"Okay, okay," Stan said, almost feeling sorry for him. "How many guns did he take?"

"Two."

Stan made a mental note to call his deputy from the car and tell him to go over to Stickup's place and collect the guns.

He noted the camper's stove, the cans of food, the boots, the box of tools including a flashlight, the cans of car oil, and the coils of rope, no doubt for strapping the deer to the roof. He stared at the tin patches on the floor and the cheap vinyl glued onto the sagging seats. How'd I ever let him get away with driving this junk around town? he asked himself.

"Butch didn't drive this one around," Red said. He only used it for camping." He looked sadly at the van. "Butch figured he could get ten, maybe twelve thousand for this van once he patched it up." He said hopefully, "Maybe if Butch is bye-bye, I can get the van."

"Forget it, Red. Anyone tries selling this junkyard candidate gets a stay in jail."

Red looked crestfallen.

Stan looked round again. He felt that he was missing something. But everything seemed normal.

"Okay," he said to Red. "Let's get going."

On the way back to his car Stan studied the ground around the camp. He could see no signs of a struggle: no broken bushes, no displaced rocks. Here and there the ground looked smoothed over. Someone might have covered up his tracks by sweeping the dirt with his hands or some instrument, but it was hard to say. The road was too hard and dry to have taken any deep impressions.

At the car he phoned his deputy and then called the Wilkes Barre police to send up a photographer and a fingerprint man. He didn't expect they'd find anything. But just in case Butch didn't come wandering back from a three day drunk in the woods, they'd have checked the van for any evidence of foul play.

He reseated the microphone, sat a minute, then stepped out of the car. "We're going back, Red. I think I know what's missing."

Red followed, looking puzzled.

Stan opened the van, stepped in, moved a few boxes, tapped around to see if the floor held any hollow spots big enough for a container, then turned to Red. "Did you or Stickup take the beer?"

Red swallowed. "Stickup. But there was only two bottles. Honest to God, sheriff. That's all. Me and Stickup couldn't believe it."

Stan thought he heard the whine of genuine disappointment. "You're not telling me Butch went on the wagon."

"No way. Butch said he was bringing up enough for a week like he always did. But I swear, sheriff, there was only two bottles. Stickup took them. He said he was going to save them to toast Butch at his funeral." Red swallowed again. "Sounds like we knew he was dead. We didn't. We just thought Butch might have got shot in some hunting accident. Otherwise he'd have been here to meet us, same as always."

"Where did you find the two bottles?"

"They weren't in the van. They were in the stream, getting cold. Butch always stashed a few bottles there every morning."

Stan nodded. It wasn't unusual. He'd done it himself when he was younger. But there should have been a supply of beer. Whoever saw Butch last had taken his beer except for the two bottles. The thief hadn't been aware of Butch's habits.

"Say, sheriff," Red said, "you think maybe somebody came up, robbed poor Butch of his beer, then did him in?"

"Maybe," Stan said.

Red shook his head. "Nah. Now I think on it a little, they wouldn't need to rob Butch. Butch woulda invited them to drink with him. Besides, who'd kill a guy over some home brew?"

"Who knew Butch brought beer with him on his hunting trips?"

Red chuckled. "Just about everybody. Butch liked company when he drank. He even left the barn door open for people to help themselves provided they drank the stuff with him. On hunting trips he'd invite half the county. Besides, his wife, uh, ex-wife, used to complain all over town about Butch coming back from hunting with nothing to show for it but a hangover and a foul temper."

"I see," Stan said. "C'mon. Let's get back."

On the way back to Bloomsville Stan tried to raise his deputy again. He wanted the bottles of beer confiscated along with Butch's guns.

He was too late. By the time he got back to his office, his deputy had left a message. Stickup was in the hospital. The doctors hadn't determined yet what had made him sick, but they suspected poison. Stickup had complained about Butch's beer making him sick.

Stan collected the second bottle from Stickup's kitchen and delivered it to the hospital's lab. By the next day a preliminary report was in.

"We haven't got all the information yet," a lab technician told him. "We've isolated a few antibiotics and a few medications: alprozalam, nitro, even some synthroid. It's quite a witches' brew."

"Anything strong enough to kill a man?"

"No one thing alone. But taken together, well, that's another matter. Your system's going to go haywire trying to process all the drugs."

"Wouldn't the drugs alter the taste of the beer enough to prevent anyone drinking too much of it?"

The lab technician shrugged. "Home brew can be pretty powerful tasting stuff. If somebody drank some good stuff, then went to work on the

bad stuff, they'd probably notice a difference, but not enough to overcome judgment already clouded with too much alcohol."

"Stickup—" Stan paused—"that is, the patient who came in with the stuff in his system didn't drink that much, did he?"

"No, he didn't. I understand he'll be pretty sick for a while, but he'll live. Might be enough to turn him into a teetotaler. Got any idea who loaded the beer?"

"I've some ideas."

"It would have to be somebody with access to a lot of different medications. Somebody who worked in a hospital, maybe."

"Or in a nursing home."

"Yeah, a possibility," the lab technician agreed.

Wondering if he'd have the guts to arrest Sister Mary Leonard should it prove necessary, Stan drove, rather more slowly than usual, up to St. Catherine's Manor. He detoured onto Butch's farm first, confirming, as his deputy had reported, that no one was there.

Sister Mary Leonard, managing to keep both voice and face neutral, said no one at the manor had seen Butch for several days.

Stan explained that he'd been reported missing by his buddies.

"A hunting accident, no doubt," she said.

"Maybe. But I don't think so. I think he might have been poisoned."

Sister Mary Leonard looked triumphant, her expression rather like that of St. Michael looking down at the slain dragon in the picture behind her desk. "His home brew? Butch finally poisoned himself with too much hops?"

"I don't think so." Stan told Sister Mary Leonard the lab's findings. "It would have been easy enough for someone to dump pills into Butch's brew. The barn, I understand, was always open."

She was silent for a few moments. "Murder," she said finally. "It's never really justified, is it?"

"I don't know," Stan said. "I like to think not. But then, when I was in the navy, I saw situations—oppression and poverty—where I couldn't swear I wouldn't murder somebody. I don't know what I'd do up against somebody who was deliberately making my life or the lives of those I loved miserable." He watched Sister Mary Leonard carefully.

"Yes," she said, staring down at a paperweight on her desk. "I couldn't swear that I wouldn't murder somebody, either. It's understandable if you feel there's no other way out." She looked up. "You are obviously thinking someone from St. Catherine's did this."

Stan knew better than to equivocate. "Yes."

"I admit that it looks that way. Where did you find the body?"

Stan sighed. "That's the problem. There isn't any."

Sister Mary Leonard's eyebrows shot up. "I understand it's not easy to dispose of a body."

"No," Stan said. "Damned difficult. But Butch might be lying in some hole in the woods. Eventually somebody will find him."

"Perhaps he'll show up alive and well," Sister Mary Leonard said, none too cheerily.

"Maybe. In the meantime I have to assume we have a murder on our hands." He automatically included Sister Mary Leonard in the problem. "I'll need your help."

She nodded.

"You have your suspicions, don't you?" Stan asked.

She nodded again. "Not that I'm going to tell you. After all, they are only suspicions. But I'll let you in on what information I have. Then you can draw your own conclusions. You know that the cat posse bears . . ." she paused ". . . or bore no love for Butch. I can't imagine any of them having the strength to bury a body, but who knows. You'll want to talk to them. But there's somebody else you should talk to. Lottie, Butch's ex-wife works here."

"I thought she might. That's how you knew about the physical abuse."

She picked up her phone. "I'll get her in here."

After a few minutes' conversation she hung up. "Lottie's gone to Atlantic City for two days. She'll be back on duty on Thursday. You can talk to her then. In the meantime I'll take you around to the cat posse members. You don't mind if I accompany you?"

Stan didn't think she'd accept anything other than agreement. Besides, he felt it might be useful to watch her behavior. He hadn't yet dismissed her as a suspect. He glanced at St. Michael as they left the office.

The first resident, Marie Demarak, was standard assisted-living issue: a woman with curly gray hair, the beginnings of osteoporosis, arthritic fingers, a tendency to drop off to sleep, and a room full of pictures of grandchildren. But she had a sunshine smile that made Stan want to invite her out for dinner.

"Well," she said, "if Mr. Peabody is dead, I guess that's too bad. But then . . ." She looked at her cat curled on the floor by the balcony window.

At Stan's inquiry concerning any possible knowledge about Butch's supposed demise, she looked shocked. "I can't help you, Sheriff Odyssek. I can't imagine anyone's wanting to actually kill Mr. Peabody. Oh," she said, "perhaps some of our posse said things like that. You know, wishing he were; well, gone. But no one would actually do anything. Everyone is so nice. We all help each other, you know. We call it the fund."

"The fund?"

"Yes. It makes life so much easier. We share things. We all contribute."

"Money?" Stan asked.

"Oh no. Of course we are all willing to help each other out with a little money if necessary. But I mean we share other things. Someone collects magazines, books, candy, other things." She glanced at Sister Mary

Leonard. "Of course we don't give the candy or anything else to anyone who shouldn't have it. Never."

Sister Mary Leonard frowned. "I hope not. We talked about that, didn't we?"

Marie brushed an imaginary cat hair from her skirt. "Someone, I think maybe Dorothy, or Helen, or maybe Simon, collected toys for the cats. So we could exchange, you know. To give the cats variety." She sighed. "Only they didn't like it. They do like their own toys. But we share other things, even cat litter. It's nice to have someone get it for us. It can be so heavy."

Stan nodded, feeling as if he could fall asleep himself. "Right," he said, rising from the flowered couch. "Well, if you think of anything that could help me, just let Sister know."

Marie flashed her smile, and Stan almost sat down again. He hadn't seen so bright a smile since Carol Ann, with whom he'd fallen in love in the second grade. He'd never really gotten over Carol Ann. He thought he'd pay a visit to Marie now and then.

The next resident, Beatrice Turner, destroyed any image of a standard assisted-living person. She had a short bob cut, and despite its gray color, it lent her the look of a twenties flapper, a look enhanced by the smoothness of her skin. Stan remembered her as the woman from the posse who thought Butch's customers were chicken.

She looked shrewdly at Stan as he told her about Butch. "So which of us do you think did it?" she asked when he had finished.

"Perhaps all of you. Am I correct?"

"Ah," she said, "so you saw *Murder on the Orient Express*, too."

"An evasion. You haven't answered my question."

She laughed. "Surely you don't expect me to say yes."

Stan laughed, too. "No, I don't. But if you do know something about Butch's disappearance, I expect you to tell me the truth."

"I never lie," she said.

"Do you think Butch might have been poisoned?"

She thought a moment. "Yes, he might have. I know there are enough pills dispensed around here for anyone to have collected a few."

"Who does the dispensing?"

Beatrice said nothing for a moment. "Lottie, Butch Peabody's ex-wife, among others. But I expect you know that." She looked at Sister Mary Leonard.

"I would have told him if you had not," Sister Mary Leonard said. "But Lottie is very responsible. Besides, I know she couldn't obtain extra pills, and I doubt very much that she withheld pills from anyone."

Beatrice nodded. "I doubt it, too."

"Could anyone else have obtained extra pills?"

"Not from our dispensary," Sister Mary Leonard said. "We keep very close tabs."

"They certainly do," Beatrice said. "Damn stingy about it. You have to be near death to get a lousy aspirin. Of course, some residents go to their own doctors and get their own prescriptions. Others have relatives who are more compassionate than our dispensary. So I guess the answer to your question is yes. Someone could have collected pills."

Stan realized that he'd have to be direct. "Do you know of anyone who has?"

Beatrice nodded. "I hate to be a snitch. But I realize that it is necessary. Several people have. Marie isn't as innocent as that bright smile seems to indicate. Simon likes to have a bit of a stash, too. Frankly, so do I. So I guess we're all suspects."

"Indeed you are," Stan said.

"Oh, wonderful. I've always wanted to be. But couldn't you have taken me in for questioning?"

Stan considered asking Beatrice for a date. "Perhaps I will yet."

"You know that we older folk can't always remember what we did or when."

"And you'll probably agree that you are not always reliable witnesses. You can get confused about anything you might have seen, right?"

"Sheriff," Beatrice said, "I like you. Next election, if I'm still kicking, I'll vote for you."

The next day Stan and his deputies combed the woods but found nothing. They checked Butch's house, barn, and land thoroughly. No body anywhere. No signs of recent digging at either Butch's property or in the woods. If his body were buried somewhere, the killer had been particularly clever about it. Moreover, the lab people had found no fingerprints at the campsite, and the guns Stickup had taken had not been fired recently.

Two days later Butch was still missing, but Lottie had returned from Atlantic City. She agreed to come in to the office to talk to Stan.

She was a small wiry woman with arm muscles that Stan suspected she'd developed helping the more immobile residents of St. Catherine's. She had the good sense not to pretend any sorrow over Butch's disappearance. "He's like a bad penny, sheriff. Hard to get rid of. He'll probably show up in a few days, bragging about the duration of this binge. But if he doesn't, I can't say I'll shed any tears. He doesn't pay alimony anyway. I refused it. I didn't want a penny from him. I still don't. I can take care of myself."

"Any idea who might have put the pills in Butch's beer?"

Lottie shrugged. "Nope. I didn't, if that's what you're thinking."

"But you did have access to such pills at St. Catherine's."

"Sure. But they keep close tabs. I have to mark down the name of every resident to whom I give a pill. And I'm given only enough for those residents who have authorization from the RN's to get a pill."

"You could withhold pills, couldn't you?"

Lottie thought for a minute. "Yes, I guess I could. But it would mean my job if I got caught. Besides, the RN's doublecheck on us practical nurses. That doesn't mean that every resident will remember properly. Some of them don't. So I guess I can't prove I didn't take pills."

"Ever give any extra pills to any of the patients?"

"I can't. I just told you. I get only what is authorized. No more. No less."

"Do you know if any of the residents might have stored up pills? Perhaps been given a pill here and there by other residents?"

"I don't know of anyone who's done it. That isn't to say it couldn't be done. The residents are always helping each other with stuff. They call it 'the fund.' No pills that I know of, though. We do constantly warn them about giving other residents pills. Anyway, a lot of the residents don't keep their own pills."

"But some do?" Stan asked.

"Some do, I guess. But it's frowned on, and only their doctors can okay it."

"But it's possible?"

"Sure. Like I said, the residents often help each other." Lottie chuckled. "Some of the men pass round girlie magazines. The women exchange yarn a lot. Beatrice passes out murder mysteries. Simon dispenses cat litter." Lottie chuckled. "At least, once he had a car full of it. Trunk and back seat were piled high. I saw him with it in the parking lot. Said he got a real bargain. Simon's a nice guy. He likes to watch out for the other residents."

"Yes," Stan said. "He does. When did you see him with the cat litter?"

"I guess a week or two ago. Why?"

"Sister Mary Leonard said that when he left to visit his daughter a few days ago he wasn't feeling well. I hope he didn't hurt himself lifting all that cat litter."

"Gosh. I hope not."

Stan informed Lottie that he might have to talk with her again. He waited until she left the office before he called in his deputies and told them that they would all be driving up to Butch's farm and that they would all need shovels.

"Somebody find something?"

"Not yet," Stan said.

He kept his idea to himself on the drive up. He didn't want to look like an idiot, and his idea seemed idiotic.

At the farm Stan hauled out the shovels and handed them around. "I think I might know where Butch is."

The deputies looked at each other. "We went over this farm carefully. There's no body and no sign of any gravedigging," Matt, the young deputy, said.

"I know," Stan said. He led his men to Butch's barn and stood looking

at the tires, carburetors, hubcaps, old TV sets, rusted bedsprings, and dented fenders littering the ditch that ran alongside it.

"There," he said, pointing to the far end of the junkpile. "We dig there."

"In *that* stuff?" Matt said. "Damn. After the rain two days ago, it'll be like concrete."

"Yeah," Stan said, jumping down to begin the task.

It took only ten minutes of digging, though rather grueling digging, to make the discovery.

Butch's body was wrapped in a tarp, probably his own, Stan speculated, from the hunting camp. They called the medical examiner, and Butch was given his final ride down Three Mile Road to Bloomsville.

He had been poisoned, the medical examiner reported, probably with the same brew that had made Stickup sick.

"You found his body *where*?" Sister Mary Leonard asked, her eyebrows raised so high they seemed to disappear under the veil of her habit.

"Beside the barn, in the ditch near the junk Simon complained about when you came to report Butch's shooting of the cats. Under a mound of cat litter."

"I see," Sister Mary Leonard said, lowering her eyebrows and composing her face into an expressionless mask.

Stan repeated what Lottie had told him about Simon and the cat litter.

"I see."

"What exactly did you see?" Stan asked.

Sister Mary Leonard bowed her head for a moment, then lifted it. Her face was still expressionless. "Did you know Simon has had a stroke?"

"No," Stan said, feeling just a little less rotten than he had a minute ago.

"His daughter called. Simon had a stroke two days ago. He is still in the hospital. He cannot speak, and he cannot move his right side. The brain damage was severe. His family has decided not to have him given blood thinners. Simon is likely to have another stroke, probably a fatal one, sooner rather than later."

"I see." Stan wasn't surprised. It couldn't have been easy to retrieve Butch's body, dragging it from the tent, probably bending the pole in the process, hoisting it into a car, wrapping it in a tarp, hauling it to the ditch beside the barn, and emptying bags of cat litter over it. Stan felt relieved. He didn't want to bring charges against an old man.

"Murder is never justified, is it?" Sister Mary Leonard said. "But sometimes, if the crime must be made public, a whole family must suffer for the crime one of them commits."

"Yes." Stan rubbed his forehead and took a deep breath. "But most Mafia hit men don't have families. At least that's what I read."

"Mafia hit men?" Sister Mary Leonard leaned forward.

"You remember. The customers who almost got killed. The town rumor is that they were Mafia men."

"Oh yes, yes. That's right." Sister Mary Leonard nodded. "Very tough customers to fool with. But would they have dumped cat litter over the body?"

Stan pondered that one, then saw the way out. "No. I have to admit that Simon probably dumped the litter on Butch's property to spite him. But he probably didn't even know he was burying the body the Mafia men had dumped there. The body was wrapped in a tarp. You wouldn't know that it was anything but some drums of old oil Butch had disposed of. About all I could do to Simon is fine him for littering."

"Yes," Sister Mary Leonard said. "A fine for littering. I see. Do you think you'll ever track the Mafia men down?"

"Most likely not. Any more than I could track down how the pills got into Butch's brew. Beatrice said even if they all gave pills to someone, say, maybe Simon, they wouldn't really remember doing it. Do you think any of the residents might have seen the Mafia guys and might remember what they looked like?"

"You are welcome to ask."

Stan figured he would be.

He asked, but no one remembered.

THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



Hulton / Liaison Agency

Service with a smile! That's with a *smile*, gentlemen. We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime) based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to AHMM, Dell Magazines, 475 Park Avenue South, New York, New York 10016. Please label your entry "May Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

The winning entry for the December Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 141.

FICTION

THE BLUE WATERLINE



David K. Harford

Ityped: Too many people live in the prisons of old ideas—prisons that have been built for them but often, too often, prisons they've built for themselves.

The cursor blinked on the computer screen.

I leaned back in the chair and thought about what it took to arrive at that one thought.

It took two years really, if you counted back to when the drought actually started. And, there were several more recent events, too—all directly related to that lengthy drought—that got me there.

A two-year-long series of happenings boiled down to produce one thought; it was kind of like having to boil down gallons of maple sugar sap to get only one tablespoon of maple syrup.

Those recent events were clear: Westline running out of water because of the drought; some of the townsfolk deciding we needed a new waterline to replace the old deteriorated tile line running down from the mountain stream that had been Westline's supply of fresh, clean water since the hamlet was settled back in the late 1800's; a disagreement among the townsfolk—young against old mostly, on how to proceed with the new waterline, and even why we should—that divided the town in a way I've never seen before.

And of course the Longstreet beagle's unburying that bone, a human bone, and dropping it on Mary's lap while she was napping on the couch—that really stirred things up, too.

Suddenly we had a decades-old murder on our hands to go along

with all our other festering problems.

But from all these and other incidents I was able to extract that notion of people and their prisons.

Here's how it came down.

PART I

THEM BONES, THEM BONES,
THEM DRY BONES . . .

Under a blistering hot August sun Longstreet and me were kicking up the dust on the dirt road, heading to the fire hall for yet another water meeting.

We wanted to go early to pull the town's only firetruck out of the bay, set up a couple of tables for anyone who brought sandwiches or cookies, get the coffee urn brewing, and arrange enough metal chairs to accommodate the large crowd we anticipated being there.

As we walked along, I noticed all around us how badly people's yards were yellowed and dried from the drought. The tree leaves were wilting in the heat, and Kinzua Creek, normally thirty or forty feet wide, was down to a trickle of water. All around the county people's wells were drying up. And there seemed to be no relief in sight.

We were debating whether the metal chairs were a good idea, since at the last water meeting old Leon Jackson got so mad he picked up the chair he'd been sitting in and heaved it across the room, narrowly missing Widow Smythe's head. Then Leon stormed out of the meeting rubbing the stub of his amputated right arm so hard I thought

he might rub the skin right down to exposed bone. Hollering and screaming he was, about how he'd never paid no water bill in Westline and he'd lived here all his life, and if the younger folks had any ambition, they'd go out and patch that tile line, just like him and Burt Fallows and some of the others had done throughout the years.

So we were wondering if we shouldn't somehow nail the chairs to the floor when Mary Longstreet's wife, let out a toe-curling scream from their house.

"Get off me!" She screamed so loud folks in neighboring Elk County probably stuck their heads out their windows, wondering what all the commotion was about.

"Get off me! Get off me!" Her scream had the kind of terror in it that could pierce a witch's heart.

We were fifty yards from the house, and before I could pinpoint exactly where the screaming was coming from, Longstreet snorted once and then bolted, like a deer spooked from a thicket, straight for his place.

He took the dried-up drainage ditch running near his yard in one leap, and before he bounded up the steps to his porch, he turned quickly, stuck his head in his shed, and pulled his .44 Mag' off the workbench where he'd been cleaning it right before I met him to go to the water meeting. He loaded it on the run.

Longstreet was charging in his front door, and I wasn't even half-way across his yard yet.

"Get off me! Get off me!" Mary still wailed.

But as I climbed the steps to the front porch and pulled the screen door open, I could tell she wasn't screaming get off me but get *it* off me, get *it* off me.

In the living room was an unusual sight.

Mary was lying on the couch, her head slightly raised. Her hands tore feverishly at her hair and she was rubbing them up and down her face, too, a look of horror in her wide eyes, her skin as white as their lace curtains. She stared down at her lap. "Get it off me!" She said again, but not in so much of a scream now that Longstreet was there.

On the floor next to the couch was the stack of photo albums Mary had been working on the last month. Under a small desk Longstreet's old beagle, Beau, sat hunched with his tail curled between his legs, trembling with fear from all Mary's screaming.

Longstreet stood near the couch, the pistol at his side, staring at whatever was going on with Mary.

The beagle waddled over, still shaking, still with his tail between its legs, like a dog who has piddled on the carpet and knows better and wants to apologize and see if everything is still all right with his master. Longstreet reached down and stroked the dog's head, and the beagle kind of relaxed.

Mary, in the meantime, was no longer screaming, but she was far from being relaxed. She was making some unrecognizable grunts and groans and little whining noises through her fingers which, by now, were covering her mouth.

"Get that goddamn thing off me," she said firmly, gaining a little composure.

From right about where her shorts met bare leg, I watched Longstreet pick up what looked like a fairly large bone, bleached white. My first thought was that the dog had dragged in part of a deer carcass to chew on—not an unusual thing to happen when you're surrounded by a million acres of wood and your dog tends to wander through them woods, where deer tend to die natural, and sometimes unnatural, deaths.

It was a jawbone with a full set of teeth, but I could see right off it was too big and too wide to be a deer bone. Maybe a bear's jawbone with the front fangs knocked off, I thought next.

With the thing off her lap, Mary rolled off the couch, tipping her stack of picture albums over. She ducked under Longstreet, and made a beeline for the bathroom, where we soon heard her running water in the sink. Beau, the beagle, had pretty much quit shaking and was pawing at Longstreet's leg. I supposed he wanted that jawbone, his snack, back.

When Longstreet turned to show me the bone, I saw right away it didn't belong to no bear either. It was the lower jawbone of a human that the dog had brought home and dropped on Mary's lap while she was napping.

The bone and teeth were cracked in places, and mud was caked on it here and there. But it appeared to be fully intact.

Longstreet turned it over in his

hands, then pushed it in my direction so I could see it better. He glanced down at his beagle, who just sat there looking up at him, his tail sweeping the carpet.

"Christ, it's human," I said.

"Sure is," he said, and he spoke to the beagle. "Where'd you get this?"

Beau just swept the carpet with its tail and pawed Longstreet again.

"Get that goddamned thing out of this house," Mary said from the bathroom. "I wake up, look down, and there that thing is, looking back at me smiling."

"It couldn't have been smiling," Longstreet said, trying to make light of the incident to calm his wife down more. "It needs the upper half to be smiling." I chuckled and thought about the sound of one hand clapping.

"Get it out of here. Put it in the shed. Throw it away. Bury it. Call the police. I don't care what you do with it." She came out of the bathroom drying her face in a towel. "But get it out of this house. Now!"

We put it on the workbench in the shed; a bleached lower human jawbone sitting there among the greasy pliers, screwdrivers, and other tools. We decided we'd look at it closer and figure out what we should do with it after the town water meeting, which suddenly we realized we were late for.

The fire hall was nearly filled by the time we got there. Some others had done the work we'd intended to do. But they didn't nail the chairs down, we noticed.

The discussion over the proposed waterline must have started right out at a fairly hot level because old Leon Jackson was already voicing his opinion at a feverish pitch, lecturing all those who would pay him any mind.

"Five thousand dollars for that blue plastic pipe I see stacked up there?" Leon Jackson bellowed at Mack Gill, who was naturally leading the meeting, standing at a small podium in front of the townsfolk nestled in their chairs. "You got dreams of writing checks your reality can't cash," Leon went on. "Where are you going to get that kind of money? Just fix the old line, and all you'll spend is a few hundred dollars for cement. Hell, I'll pay for it, even." He rubbed that stub of his right arm furiously. "That's how we always did it." Using his stub, he pointed at old Burt Fallows, whom I was very, very surprised to see at the meeting.

Old Burt was the town recluse, at nearly eighty years old he was about the same age as Leon Jackson, but Burt Fallows was in worse shape physically.

Mack Gill was a retired banker born and raised in Westline and was someone almost everyone trusted with their money. He was a natural to lead the waterline project, at least the financial end of it. "We've secured a very low interest rate on a loan at the bank," Mack Gill explained patiently to Leon Jackson.

"You got to pay loans back." Leon countered. "Or has that changed, too?"

"We'll pay it back."

"How?"

"By charging everyone who's on the line a hookup fee and a monthly fee as I've already explained to you." Mack Gill stood firm. "When the loan's paid off, we can possibly drop the monthly fees. Seems the fairest way for everyone. It's the only way that I can see, Leon."

"It's your way. It's the young and the lazy folks' way. But it ain't the only way."

Old Leon scowled across the room at Longstreet and me as if we were the young, lazy ones he was talking about. He knew we favored installing the new line. He kept rubbing that stub hatefully.

Our waterline problem was simple. We were dealing with a twelve inch tile line almost a hundred years old, brought from a reservoir fed by that mountain stream and gradually running downhill four thousand feet through the Allegheny National Forest to where the water collected and filled a large penstock. From this penstock the water then flowed through smaller pipes and eventually into people's houses. Or at least it was supposed to work that way.

But through all those years, hard winter frosts, tree roots worming down deep, hefty rocks shifting in the ground and pressing down on the tile pipe, all of these contributed to the tile line's getting busted up underground in too many places. The point we were at right then was that the tile line leaked so badly underground we were basically irrigating the forest. Then, when the water level in the mountain stream dropped and the water ta-

ble dropped with it, as it had during the drought conditions of the last two years, none of the water was making it to the penstock because what little was flowing through the tile pipe was all leaking out of the busted line. Thus the town was out of water.

The problem was simple; the solution about what to do about it was causing all the uproar.

"Then you're going have the expense of a backhoe and operator to pay off," Leon was going on, "'cause I know no one in this room is going dig that line by hand."

Again Leon glared right at us, rubbing his stub.

It was no secret Leon had a burning resentment of young people. And I suppose he had good reason.

Leon, like old Burt Fallows sitting there leaning weakly on his walker, fought in World War II. Leon flew bombing missions over Germany; Burt fought the Japanese in the Pacific. But their time in the service was tragic for both men, who were in their twenties when they enlisted.

Leon, on one of his missions, was shot down in a hail of flak and anti-aircraft shells. The crew bailed out and was captured, and Leon spent over a year in various German prisoner of war camps until Germany was defeated. But as bad as the horrific rigors of POW life were for Leon, Burt Fallows had it worse.

Captured in the Pacific, Burt survived the Bataan Death March and spent three years as a POW, then half a year in hospitals recovering before he finally got home. Sadly,

within a year after he got home, his wife died.

Not long after Leon Jackson was freed and discharged from the service (Burt wasn't home from the hospital yet), he was hit head-on by a car driven by a teenage boy and girl out drinking and partying and celebrating the end of the war they never fought in. No one is sure what happened to the young couple, punishment-wise or otherwise. Back then DUTs went largely unchecked. They came out of the accident unhurt, we knew that, probably because they were drunk; drunk people have a way of surviving auto crashes that would kill a sober man.

But Leon lost his arm, crushed between the car and a tree.

Like Burt Fallows' wife's dying, it was sad and tragic when you think about it. Leon survived the brutal German POW camps, survived I don't know how many bombing missions, survived being shot down, only to return from the war and lose his arm a few months later to a couple of young drunks.

Bitter? Leon was bitter. And he remained bitter toward young people from then on, while Burt Fallows just more or less stepped out of the world altogether (we figured because of his wife's untimely death and everything he'd gone through as a guest of the Japanese). He became the recluse that we knew him to be while we were growing up.

"We've got Sam King coming down from Lantz Corners with his backhoe," Mack Gill explained to Leon, patiently but showing no signs of backing down. "Sam has

said if we buy him a couple of dinners at the inn and some beers and lunch, he'll donate his machine and himself to the project."

Leon Jackson grunted.

"So really," Mack went on, "the only cost we have is a low interest loan for materials. Once that four inch pipe you see stacked up there is in the ground with water running through it, Leon, we won't have to bother with it again. And we'll always have water."

"Four inches of water ain't going to be enough," Leon said.

"It'll be more than enough."

"I'll believe that when I see it."

Almost like that was a cue, Burt stood and leaned on his walker, his hands shaking badly. "I'm siding with Leon," he said, his voice hoarse and scratchy. "We don't need it. Some folks won't be able to pay a monthly water bill."

Except for one other time, that was the most I'd ever heard old Burt Fallows say in one breath, and even that short remark seemed to wear him out.

"Sit down, Leon," young Jimmy Thompson spoke up boldly. "Let's hear what Mr. Gill has to say. Some of us may want water."

"Don't you tell me to sit down, you lazy, good-for-nothing lout." Leon turned his battery of angry insult directly at Jimmy. "I know you ain't going to be helping on this project either way it goes. You can't hold a job now as it is." He hissed out a bitter laugh. "I'd seen more and done more when I was your age than you'll ever see or do in all your life. So, don't you tell me to sit down."

That shut Jimmy Thompson right up. The truth can do that. At twenty-two years old Jimmy hadn't held a job longer than a few weeks, preferring to live off his mother.

"When and where are you going to start digging?" Leon asked, turning his attention back to Mack Gill.

"Next week we'll start," Mack Gill explained. "Sam King said he's got next week free." Mack looked around at the rest of the folks. "We haven't decided whether it's best to start from the reservoir and work down to the penstock or vice versa."

"It would seem to me that starting at the reservoir and working down would be the most sensible thing to do," Leon said. "But then, none of you folks favoring this nonsense has made much sense since the project first came up for discussion. The sensible thing would be to get a crew together, go up there, dig by hand, and fix them leaks by hauling bags of cement around, just like Burt here and me always did. That would be the sensible thing to do. That is, if you can find a crew willing to work." He glared at Jimmy Thompson again.

Leon Jackson, Burt Fallows shuffling alongside, walked out of the fire hall saying nothing more. Leon cast an angry look at me and Longstreet as he walked past us.

They were getting better; at least they hadn't thrown any chairs.

"I don't understand him," Longstreet said, shaking his head as we left the fire hall after the meeting. "It just makes sense to replace that line. And it really irks me that old Leon seemed to be looking right at

you and me when he was talking about young lazy folks. It's getting to the point I could easily hate him. Hell, I do hate him."

I could see why Longstreet might be insulted. When you're a self-employed, independent logger, you work and you work hard or you don't get paid. And Longstreet always got paid.

To me and Longstreet, replacing that busted tile line with the heavy blue plastic pipe was the ticket.

But old Leon and now Burt, seemed to want us to be slaves to that tile line, just as they had been through the years, and I think right after that meeting is when I first saw a shadow of the notion about how people, like Leon and Burt, build prisons for themselves with old ideas.

Still leaning back in the chair watching the cursor blink, I thought about how we found yet another human jawbone the next day—one that didn't match the first bone—and how we feared we'd stumbled across an old Indian burial ground until we learned we'd unearthed something more menacing, right there in town.

I got an e-mail the next day from Mary saying Longstreet had an idea about the jawbone the beagle had brought home and I was to meet him at their place after lunch.

I never got e-mail from Longstreet, always from Mary. Much to Mary's dismay (and mine too, I suppose), Longstreet wanted nothing to do with computers. Computers

were a gizmo he had no use for, he told us. Would a computer cut his trees, skid his logs? Would it drive his logging truck? No, Mary told him, but there might be programs to help you bid on jobs. He even argued against that common-sense remark. I can do that with a pen and a piece of paper, he told her. I've always done that with a pen and a piece of paper.

But Mary would be slowly working on him, I was sure.

And sure enough, she was.

Around noon I stepped into their kitchen. I could hear her and Longstreet in the other room where Mary had her computer set up. She was scanning and touching up old photos of the Westline picnics held every year on the weekend following the Fourth of July and was putting those pictures in albums. It was a town project she'd volunteered for, mostly because no one else wanted to bother and Mary thought preserving the town's history through pictures was a great idea.

"It's called a mouse," Mary was explaining ever so patiently to Longstreet, "not a frog."

"Looks more like a frog than a mouse. It's green like a frog," he said.

"It's a mouse. Here, give me your hand—"

I knew what she was doing: trying to interest Longstreet in running a computer.

"Give me your hand," she said again, more firmly.

I stayed in the kitchen so my presence wouldn't embarrass and discourage him.

"That's it, honey," she said. "Don't jerk it. Let it slide. Watch the little arrow. Okay now, click with your index finger. Press that left—there you go. See what's happening?"

"Hmm," Longstreet grunted.

"Easy isn't it."

I reached back, opened the screen door, and then slammed it shut to announce I was there.

I noticed when I went into the computer room, however, that Longstreet had stepped away from the computer quickly and was looking out the window as if he hoped I'd see he wasn't anywhere near the thing he'd always said he'd never get near.

But Mary had her ways. I had no doubt that in a few months Longstreet would be sitting right at that computer screen and loving it.

"Hey," he said, "I've got an idea about that bone out in the shed we can try."

"Fire away."

We walked into the kitchen for a beer.

Longstreet shuffled through the mail on the kitchen table, then hollered, "Honey, did my gun magazine come yet? There's something I wanted to order in there, and I don't have any back issues."

"Haven't seen it," she said.

"Honestly," Longstreet said to both of us. "It's a great magazine when it gets here. Problem is, you never know when it's going to get here. If they don't get themselves together pretty soon, I'm going to stop subscribing." He shoved the stack of mail aside.

We sat down at the kitchen table, and soon Mary joined us.

"What's your idea about the jawbone?"

"I'd like to find out where the dog got that. There has to be at least an upper jawbone somewhere out there." His eyes swept the forest line outside his kitchen window.

"There's a half million acres of national forest all around us. How—"

"We'll let the beagle show us. If I let him out and we stand back inside the house, maybe he'll return to where he got it. Can't be too far away. He never goes far any more."

"Return to the scene of the crime?"

"I don't know about a crime, but maybe he'll return to where he dug it up, and then we can maybe give it a decent burial. At least the guy will have all his pieces together. He might want to talk to someone in heaven. Or hell."

"It's worth a try. Worst thing that can happen is old Beau will just go lie down in the shade of your apple tree and watch the rabbits run by."

"He might not even remember where he got it. Beagles got the attention span of an amoeba."

Beagles are actually great dogs—good with kids, nice disposition, loyal—but they tend to wander too much. Especially young beagles. Then they get lost, which is why we saw in the *Bradford Era's* *Lost and Found* that numerous beagles were listed as lost.

But Beau, as Longstreet said, old as he was, seldom ventured far from home, preferring the shade of that apple tree, so Longstreet's idea just might work.

We let the beagle out and

watched him through the windows. He headed straight for the apple tree, stood there in the shade a minute, and then, as if something had just dawned on him, made an abrupt turn and headed up the dirt road toward the fire hall.

We followed.

Beau took his time walking along the road, sniffing at this, inspecting that; several times he sat down to rest. Suddenly he turned into a thick growth of dried up goldenrod and blackberry bushes and headed for the town's water penstock. By the time we got there, the dog was already digging in the ground about twenty feet downhill from the penstock.

As we neared him, Beau heard us and turned.

In his mouth was another human jawbone.

After a little coaxing and a stern command from Longstreet, the beagle released his snack. The second jaw was slightly smaller than the other, it seemed. But what bothered us both was that it too was a lower jawbone. Either we had at least two people buried among that brush or we had one person who had a tough time chewing.

We inspected the small area of freshly turned dirt where the dog had been digging. The soil was damp, and that told us two things. One, we had another leak in the tile line somewhere near where the old line went into the penstock, and two, it was probably because of that leak and the water running underground that those jawbones got pushed up to the surface where the beagle found them. We couldn't see

any other bones near the surface, but we assumed if we were to dig deeper we might uncover God knows how many other jawbones.

"We've got a problem," Longstreet said. He was studying the new jawbone and the set of teeth, wiping the damp soil off it. "What if we've uncovered an Indian burial ground."

It was a possibility, a good possibility, unfortunately.

The Seneca Indians were the dominant tribe when this mountainous area of northwestern Pennsylvania was being settled, and burial grounds were not uncommon. In fact, when they built the nearby Kinzua Dam across the Allegheny River back in the sixties, several Indian burial grounds had to be dug up and the remains reburied elsewhere. That this site could be yet another burial ground was not unlikely.

"If it is," Longstreet continued, "and someone finds out about it, the U.S. Forest Service and God knows how many other government agencies are going to swoop down on us and bring our little water project to a screeching halt. We have to dig around this penstock, but they won't let us do it until they're done, and that might take months, years even."

"In the meantime we're out of water."

"Hmm. I suggest we keep this between you and me until we can find out more about the bones." He scratched Beau behind the ears. "And I know exactly who might help us."

"Who?"

"Beagle," Longstreet said to his dog, "it's time for your rabies shot."

I knew then what and who he had in mind.

Longstreet set Beau on the veterinarian's table a few hours later.

When old Doc Hume reached for a muzzle, Longstreet said, "You don't need to muzzle him, Doc. He's been through this before. He won't bite you."

Doc Hume, known for his wry sense of humor and his down-home way of looking at the world, thought a moment, rubbing his gray hair, then told Longstreet, "You know, over the years in this business I've been bitten by a lot of dogs that won't bite me." He turned to where the muzzles hung. "But I've never been bitten by a dog with a muzzle on."

On went the muzzle.

I chuckled. That was Doc Hume: full of color and full of anecdotes. He was a farm vet, primarily. He'd tell you right off he'd rather stick his arm up a cow's you-know-what than pull porcupine quills out of a dog's snout. But because the big farms in the area were slowly going under one by one, Doc Hume had to open his office to domestic pets.

A lot of folks who took their pets to him didn't like him because he wasn't afraid to chew an owner up one side and down the other if he thought the pet wasn't being treated right, was being abused, overfed, under-exercised. If Doc Hume was guilty of one thing, it was having no bedside manners.

When it came to his work, he was

unpretentious and bare-boned. In fact, he was as bare-boned about things as the wild animal skulls that adorned the shelves on all his office walls—deer skulls, rabbit skulls, raccoon, bear, possum skulls that he'd collected, dried, cleaned of skin and hair, and preserved over the years.

I remember his telling me once that when he was younger he had wanted to be an anthropologist. He still dabbled in anthropology as a hobby, in fact. But when he was a student at Penn State, he told me, an anthropology teacher warned him that, although anthropology was an interesting field, unless he wanted to teach or got lucky and was involved in a significant dig somewhere around the world, he'd probably starve to death unless he got a job digging graves at a cemetery.

Doc Hume changed his major then and went into veterinary medicine. And while I'm sure he had no regrets, he was still fascinated by skulls and with studying the past by digging things up.

When Beau was done at the vet's and tied up outside the office, Longstreet brought in the two lower jawbones. The vet put on his glasses.

"I'm worried they might be Indians," Longstreet said.

Doc Hume moved to his desk and turned on a brighter light. "I see. Why does that worry you?"

"Because we found them very near to where we have to dig to replace Westline's waterline. We're out of water. What can you tell us about these, Doc?"

"You found them right in town?"

"On the outskirts, more or less. Uphill from town."

Doc Hume grunted something and studied the smaller of the two jawbones, the second one we'd found.

"This one," he said, "could be Indian. Its shape is a little unusual. It's a male, I believe, young. But this other one, the larger one, is definitely not an Indian."

"How can you tell?" I asked.

"She's had extensive dental work. That would almost preclude its being an early Indian, I would think," he added dryly.

"She?"

"Oh yes. Young woman, I would guess, by the shape and size of the jaw, the teeth."

"How long have they been buried, you think?" Longstreet peered over Doc Hume's shoulder.

"Around here that's hard to say. With our acidic soil and if it's buried in a damp place—"

"It was," Longstreet said. "But probably for a long time they were buried in a fairly dry spot. Only recently has the water leaked in."

"The reason I ask is that water speeds up decomposition. If you bury a body in the Sahara desert and at the same time bury one around here, the body here will decay at much faster rate. Are there other bones?"

"We didn't dig around."

"I'd guess, and it's just a guess and I could be wrong, but I'd say sixty to thirty years ago possibly. No older than that and probably no later. I'd really need to see more bones to make a more accurate estimate."

"But definitely a male and female?"

"I'm sure. But then I'm a vet."

"And the smaller one could be Indian?"

"The jaw is shaped a little differently from other ones I've seen. There's a very good chance it's not Caucasian. And around here the odds are it's an Indian. But that's not a given."

"What do you think we ought to do with them?" Longstreet asked.

"That depends on how much you want to bother with the police." Doc Hume lit his pipe and swiveled in his chair to face us with a grim expression.

"The police?" I said.

He nodded slowly. "You have a burial of two people: a young, probably white woman and a young man or old boy, non-white but race really unknown. These people didn't just lie down and die there. Someone buried them there. That would point to some sort of foul play—long ago, mind you, but foul play nonetheless."

Longstreet swore under his breath.

At his request we left the bones for him to go over more carefully. He promised he'd call us in a few days with more info. He wanted to consult with someone who taught anthropology at the local branch of the University of Pittsburgh.

In Longstreet's truck again, we headed home with the beagle sitting between us. After a moment Longstreet said, "If the police think they have a couple of murders, maybe even a mass grave, that whole area around the penstock

where we have to run our new line will become a crime scene. That's just as bad as the forest service and all those other agencies thinking they have an Indian burial ground. Either way, we've got to cover up where the dog dug and get our waterline in the ground before we notify anyone. That guy and girl, whoever they are, have been dead and buried this long without anyone knowing it. A few more days won't make much difference."

I agreed with him, and we decided to rake over the spot to hide the dog's work the next morning.

Right after sunrise the next day (it was already hot), rakes in hand, we hoofed it back up to the penstock. When we got there, however, what we saw sent a cold shiver up my spine.

Someone else had been there, probably the night before, and with a shovel had already dug out the entire area, much deeper than the dog had dug down. We assumed that person made off with any other bones he might have found buried there.

"Now, who'd do that?" Longstreet asked scratching his head and inspecting the dug-up dirt. We could see what sure looked like shovel marks. The soil deeper down was moister, almost muddy, because of that leak.

"Who?" I answered. "The person who put the bodies there in the first place, that's who. At least let's hope that's who, or else someone may be turning them over right now to people with authority enough to shut our water project down."

PART II MEMORIES

I snatched one of my wife's cigarettes. Thinking about prisons and Westline memories of days long past, days before I was even born, I watched the smoke curl in the light of the computer screen.

We hadn't told anyone, not even Mack Gill, about them bones. But we definitely wanted to know who had buried and then unearthed them. What did they do with them? Or, worse, what did they intend to do with them?

And whose bones were they, anyway?

I stepped into Longstreet's kitchen. Several days had passed since we'd discovered those jawbones.

The heat and rainless days were still with us, and the town's water supply was getting so critical that word was spread asking people not to use any water at night, if they could possibly get by without it. The idea was to let the penstock fill up at night as much as possible. That way, at least in the morning hours we could get some water out of it.

Folks were bathing in pools in Kinzua Creek. They hauled drinking water in. Those with washers and dryers went to laundromats.

Because flushing toilets uses water, someone (with Widow Smythe's handwriting) posted a reminder on the community bulletin board inside the fire hall:

If it's yellow, let it mellow.

If it's brown, flush it down.

It was an old saying that came out of the thirties and forties when drought conditions bore down on an area back then.

Of course the county issued a ban on any outdoor burning. The fire-truck sucked water out of the creek, and those folks who had fifty-five gallon drums could have them filled for free to water plants or gardens or to flush toilets. Everyone seemed to have a garden, and everyone was doing his or her share to conserve what little water we were able to collect in the penstock.

On the kitchen table Mary had set plastic milk jugs filled with drinking water. She was at her computer scanning old photos from the Westline picnics.

Longstreet was in the other room talking on the phone. I heard him tell someone, "I'm sure it will take a while. I'm not expecting it just this minute. But I'll tell you what I'll do. You find that for me, and I'll not only knock something off the next load of pole logs I bring you for firewood, I'll give you a load of top-notch dried hardwood so huge you won't burn it all in five years." He hung up.

He was wheeling and dealing for something from someone, and since it sounded like business, I didn't bother him about it. I opened the fridge and pulled out a couple of beers.

Sitting with me at the table, Longstreet scowled at the day's mail and then yelled into the room at his wife. "No magazine yet, honey?"

"Didn't see any."

"That's it," he said resolutely. "No

more of that magazine. I'll order that gun from somewhere else."

"Sam King will be down with his backhoe tomorrow," I said. "How long do you think it will take to complete the line?"

"Depends really on how many show up to donate time. I'd say five, seven working days, if we're lucky—if the digging's good."

From the other room Mary called out, "Honey, what was Burt Fallows' wife's name and how did she die, anyway?" Mary was from Myrtle Beach originally, so there was a lot of the town's history she didn't know.

"Burt Fallows' wife? Oh God. What *was* her name?" He looked at me for help, but I couldn't remember. She died before I was born. Until that day I don't believe I ever knew her name. "Ah God," Longstreet said, "I remember my dad telling me about it. Her name was, ah, ah, Betty. Betty Fallows."

Betty Fallows, I mouthed silently.

"I've got a picture of her here with Burt, Leon Jackson, and someone else." Mary strolled into the kitchen, old photo in hand. She plopped down in a kitchen chair and took a long swig of Longstreet's beer.

She passed the photo to me and her husband. "Who's that dark-haired guy with the sunglasses standing partway back?" She pushed some limp strands of blonde hair out of her eyes.

"Don't know." Longstreet admitted, passing the photo to me.

I didn't know either. Even though the photo was yellowed and a bit

blurred, I was able to recognize a very young, smiling Burt Fallows with his arm around an attractive young woman. A two-armed, young Leon Jackson was shown smiling and standing next to the Fallowses. They all looked in their late teens, early twenties. Leon was extending his right arm, trying to draw the dark-haired guy with sunglasses into the picture when the picture was snapped. Because the other guy was stepped back a bit and was partly hidden behind Burt Fallows' shoulder, it was hard to see any facial features that might help us identify him.

The scene in the photo was the old ballfield just outside of Westline where the annual town picnics were always held. In the background we could see two picnic tables loaded with an array of food, plates, and utensils.

"When was this photo taken?" I asked.

"Nineteen forty. It's written on the back." Mary said. "Mrs. Smythe's brother, Tom Favor, took the photo when he lived here, she told me. She gave me a bunch of them to add to the collection." Mary finished off Longstreet's beer and got three more out of the fridge. "But she couldn't remember what that guy's name was. I guess he was a friend of Leon Jackson or the Fallowses. She wasn't sure. Her memory is going, she said."

"You want to know how Betty Fallows died?" Longstreet said. "My dad told me one day after a couple of us kids started harassing Burt while he was cutting weeds with that old hand scythe he always

used. He chased us right out of the yard swinging that scythe at us, threatening to cut us down."

I interrupted his story. "He always used that scythe, that's right. I forgot about that," I said. "He was pretty handy with it, I'll say that. One day about fifteen years ago I was walking by his place, and old Burt was out there in that hot field swinging that scythe, sweat just pouring off of him. I asked him why he didn't get an electric or gas weed whacker. You know what he said? He said, 'This is the only way I know how to do it. Now, get out of here, kid.' And he went right back to working that scythe. But before nightfall he had the entire lot of weeds cut down."

Mary was scrutinizing the photo. "So how did she die?" Then she added, "She's pretty."

Longstreet thought a moment. "Well, the day Burt chased us I was so scared I went running to my dad to tell him, hoping he would go over and give old Burt Fallows a piece of his mind and maybe a couple of knuckles for chasing us with a scythe. But my dad didn't. Instead he scolded me. 'Let him alone. You kids stay off his place; stay away from him. He's a tortured man.'"

Longstreet swiveled in his chair and let his gaze sweep out the window across his yard.

"And my dad went on to tell me that after Burt Fallows was finally released from the hospital where he'd been recovering from being held prisoner by the Japanese, he was home about six months when he was offered a job down in Lock Haven working for Piper Cub

building airplanes. It was a good job, and of course he took it. He sent his wife down to Lock Haven first for a couple of weeks to find a place to stay and get set up while he closed up the house here and made arrangements to sell it. They were down there less than a year, I guess, when Betty Fallows was killed in an accident."

"What kind of accident?" Mary asked.

"My father thought it was an industrial accident. He wasn't sure. But he thought she'd gotten a job at Piper Cub, too, and he thought that's where it happened. In any case, not long afterward Burt Fallows came back to Westline alone. His house hadn't sold, so he moved back in. I guess he never spoke much about it to anyone, except maybe to Leon Jackson.

"Through the years Burt just slowly distanced himself from the town and from the rest of the world. In fact, Leon Jackson is the only person who's ever been allowed in Burt's house or even on the property. He's a tortured man, like my dad said."

"That's sad," Mary said.

"Yes," Longstreet agreed. "That's what it is all right. Sad. I see it that way now—" His voice trailed off.

Then he said, "After my dad told me that story, I looked at Burt Fallows differently. I never again taunted him and was no longer afraid of him. Just knowing why he was like he was made me realize that if a man wants to live alone, let him alone. Especially if he's got good reason to want to live alone. I think that's what my dad was aim-

ing for me to see when he told me the story."

We all sat a moment saying nothing. Finally Longstreet said to Mary, "Why not take that photo up to Leon Jackson. He loves living in the past." His voice dripped with sarcasm. "He could probably tell you who the other guy is."

Mary nodded once. "Good idea," she said. "It's the only picture I have that has Betty Fallows in it, and it would be nice, I think, to remember her, too."

Photo in hand, she was out the door, into her car, and heading down the road towards the house where Leon Jackson lived with his wife among a grove of hemlock trees up alongside the hill on the north end of town.

We drank a couple more beers.

"What is it really, do you think, that bothers Leon Jackson so much about young people? Losing his arm?" Longstreet asked. He toyed with the stack of mail.

"I'm sure that has a lot to do with it."

"You'd think he'd get over that eventually."

"You'd think so. But it's become so intertwined with who he is, so much of his personality, he probably couldn't get over it if he wanted to. He's told himself too many lies for too long, like that all young people are worthless. And to him, every day that he looks at that stub is proof of that."

"Hmm. He believes it, all right."

"Why'd you bring it up?"

"I don't know. I guess I want to try to understand him better, like I eventually did with Burt."

"It's tough to understand something you can't get near to."

"There are other ways."

"Like how?" I asked.

"Like—"

We heard Mary speed back up the driveway; then the car door was slammed hard. She stomped across the front porch, flung open the screen door, and let it slam shut behind her.

"Look what he did," she shouted at both of us. "Just look at what that old coot Leon Jackson did to my picture."

She opened her hand to show us the old picture ripped into about a hundred gazillion tiny pieces.

"He did that?" Longstreet asked as Mary dumped the pieces onto the table.

"He was sitting on his porch when I got there. I showed him the picture and real polite I asked him if he knew who the guy with the sunglasses was. I thought he'd be happy to remember the past. But no. Suddenly he turned god-awful white and just ripped the photo to shreds. Then he rose out of his rocking chair and went into his house, closing the door, never saying a word the whole time."

"And you want to understand that?" I said to Longstreet.

"Why would he do that?"

"Why?" I said. "Because he's an angry, bitter man, that's why. Seeing that picture of himself with both arms probably just stirred up that anger more, like stirring around a bed of hot embers in your woodstove until you get those embers burning again. His anger is still as much alive in him today as

it probably was back when he lost his arm."

"I'll get even with him," Mary said emphatically. "Luckily, I'd already scanned that picture a few times. I can still use it when I send the scanned images to that company to have them printed professionally. He didn't want his picture in the album? Well, it's going to be in there anyway."

The phone rang, and Longstreet answered it there in the kitchen. "Billy boy," he said into the phone. "Already? That was fast. I see. You can do that on a computer? I don't have much use for computers. Hmm. That's interesting. Yes, send it to us. What's it say?"

When Longstreet stretched the long telephone cord out so he was actually standing in the other room talking, I went over to a drawer in the kitchen where I knew Mary kept matches. The flint in my Zip-po had just popped.

I rifled through her layer of cookbooks searching for matches and was surprised to spy something else at the bottom of the stack of recipes.

I glanced over at Mary, and I knew she knew I'd seen what was in the drawer. She blushed and shook her head slightly, telling me not to say anything about what I'd found. "I want him to find it on the Internet," she mouthed.

I understood the depth of her scheming then. Hidden at the bottom of the cookbooks was the magazine Longstreet had been waiting for. God only knew how long it had been there.

Other than a burger or venison

sausage, Longstreet rarely cooked, so hiding that magazine among the cookbooks was about as safe a place as any.

I closed the drawer just as Longstreet came back into the kitchen to hang up the phone.

He sat down at the table, peeled a label off one of the water-filled milk jugs, and stared vacantly out the window. Then he started to rearrange the shredded pieces of the photo, as if he were trying to piece together a puzzle.

"Who was that on the phone?" Mary asked.

"Billy Pierce."

"He wants another load of pole wood?"

"Yeah. I'll take care of him. I told him I'd fix him up good if he looked something up for me on the micro-filmed copies of the *Bradford Era*, where he does a lot of research."

"What did you ask him to look up?"

"Leon Jackson. The newspaper account at that time about his accident when he lost his arm."

"Why?" I asked.

Longstreet still seemed preoccupied with something, and toyed absentmindedly with the ripped photo to pieces. It took a moment before he said, "Well, like I was telling you just a bit ago, I got to thinking this morning that maybe if I understood more about Leon and his accident and everything I'd be able to see him a little differently. I don't know. You know, understand where he's coming from. Maybe I wouldn't hate him so much."

"That's decent," I said. "That can free you."

"Yeah. I thought it might be like when my dad told me about Burt Fallows' wife dying and how I suddenly saw Burt differently. So I wanted Billy Pierce to get me the newspaper account of Leon Jackson's car accident. But now—" He scooped up a few of the ripped pieces of photo.

"Did Billy Pierce get you that?"

"Did he ever. Are you ready for this?"

When I said nothing, he continued.

"It's pretty much how we've always heard it, except for one thing. Nineteen forty-five. June twenty-eighth. Leon was hit almost head-on and thrown from the car, which pinned his arm against a tree. Do you know how many decorations that guy has from the service? The headline in the story said **HIGHLY DECORATED VET SERIOUSLY HURT IN ACCIDENT**. And they listed some of his decorations. Old Leon has earned a Silver Star, a Bronze Star, a Purple Heart, and a few I've never heard of."

"Well, that's something to admire in him anyway. Dampen the hate a little bit—"

"Yeah, well, that's not all the article said."

"What else?"

"They gave the names and ages of the two teenagers, who were drunk. Polly Myers, age eighteen. She was the driver. And, are you ready?"

"Ready."

"Charlie Red Feather, age nineteen."

"Red Feather? Indian?"

"Well, he wasn't Chinese."

That sat me back in my chair.

We both looked down at the photo Leon Jackson had taken his anger out on. I think right about then we were both thinking about a very angry Leon Jackson and those two jawbones old Doc Hume still had—jawbones of a young white woman and a young man, possibly Indian.

I've always liked the rich smell of fresh-dug dirt, and early the next morning, before it got too hot, me and Longstreet were where the smell of fresh-dug dirt permeated the air.

Only a handful of people showed up the first day of the waterline project. Jimmy Thompson wasn't there. His mother said he didn't feel good, even though he'd seemed healthy enough when we saw him getting drunk the night before at the Westline Inn, where he'd also cashed one of his mother's checks.

Mack Gill was there ready for work, of course, and a couple of others from town like Smitty and Feldman. Even a camp owner whose camp was on the waterline came all the way down from Erie to lend a hand.

First thing we did was get organized.

Leading off was Sam King perched on his backhoe, pulling levers, going through scooping out a trench about three feet deep, following the right-of-way of the old line. As he went, Sam snagged the old tile line and ripped it out of the ground.

Longstreet and me followed and cleaned out any large rocks and broken pieces of tile line so the four

inch plastic pipe would sit evenly at the bottom of the ditch.

Behind us, Mack Gill, Smitty, and Feldman laid the blue plastic pipe, popping the two ends together, placing a rubber O-ring seal at each joint.

Three more men carried the pipe down the right-of-way and strung it out along the ditch so it could be laid easier.

We'd already installed a shutoff valve where the waterline came out the reservoir, so we could turn on water at the end of each day and run it through the tile line we hadn't dug up yet.

At one point we'd caught up to Sam King, and as I sat resting against the ditch walls, smoking a cigarette, I got to thinking about that gun magazine I'd seen hidden in the cookbook drawer and Mary's attempt to get Longstreet interested in computers. I figured I just might help.

I knew Billy Pierce had scanned and e-mailed a copy of that newspaper account to Mary, so it seemed like a good time to ask Longstreet, "You get that article e-mailed to you?"

"Yup."

"Mary show you how to open an e-mail?"

"Yup."

"Print it out?"

"Yup. In fact, I had to do it because she said she needed both hands to run the printer."

I smiled to myself. I knew that wasn't true. You normally didn't need two hands to print something out. Leon Jackson with one arm could print something out. "Be care-

ful," I told him. "You're getting to be a regular computer guru. I'll send you an e-mail tonight."

"Don't bother."

"Why not?"

"I don't want anything to do with those computers. That's Mary's thing. I'll do things the way I've always done them."

"Even though it might be easier and faster and more fun?"

"Don't care."

I could see he was getting irritated.

"It's the way I've always done it," he added.

Exasperated by his stubbornness, I told him, "You know who you sound like? Not wanting to try anything new, you sound just like your buddy Leon Jackson."

He jerked his head around at me.

I bent over and picked up a large rock to set on the backfill side of the ditch. "Yes, sir," I said. "A young Leon Jackson. That's you. You and Leon got a lot in common—both stuck in the past with your old notions and your old ways of doing things. Unwilling to learn new ideas or try new and better ways of getting things done. You're both prisoners of your past. Yup. You and Leon ought to be married."

I waited a moment for that to sink in, then added, "You know what they say? They say our own faults and shortcomings are the most irritating when we see them in someone else. And I think you see a little of you in Leon and that might be another reason you hate him."

I was sure he had an answer to that and probably would have giv-

en it to me with both barrels, had we not just then noticed Leon Jackson himself walking up the waterline right-of-way to inspect (and criticize probably) the water project. The old man was sporting a cane because of the uneven ground.

We stayed in the ditch, and Leon stood towering directly above us. The sun filtering through the tree leaves was squarely behind his head, partially blinding us. It was like a solar eclipse: as we squinted up at him, we could see only the dark outline of Jackson's face. But we heard his voice clearly enough.

"That's not such a smart idea," he said, gruffly pointing into the ditch with his cane.

"What isn't?" Longstreet asked.

"What's wrong now, Leon?"

"You busting up the old tile line. No one said nothing about doing that."

"What else are we going to do?"

"Why don't you lay that piece of plastic crap next to the tile line? That way, when you find out the pipe isn't going to carry enough water, you'll still have the tile line to fall back on. Because you're doing it like this, we'll end up with nothing—no water at all."

"It'll work," Longstreet said evenly.

"That's how I'd have done it."

"You're not doing it," Longstreet countered.

"You're damn right I'm not." He turned to leave, as if he'd seen all he needed to see—something, anything to criticize. As he walked away, using the cane, he said, "Haven't got many people out here to work, do you? Don't surprise me."

"We've got enough to get the job done," Longstreet replied. But what he said next surprised the hell out of me. He waited until Leon had taken a few steps back down the right-of-way, before calling to him, "We wanted Charlie Red Feather to come out and help us, Leon. But no one seems to be able to find him."

Old Leon Jackson stopped dead in his slow-moving tracks, slowly turned his head our way. You could see that his complexion had suddenly turned reddish pink. For the longest moment he glared at Longstreet with a look as hot as two laser beams, his cheeks puffing in and out nervously.

Then he turned back around and headed slowly down the right-of-way, using his cane, saying nothing more.

We had to knock off early on the third day of working the waterline because Sam King informed us he had to leave early with his backhoe to help repair a waterline his neighbor had accidentally broken, sending valuable water spraying everywhere. So Longstreet and I decided to call on Burt Fallows.

We were almost there when we noticed Leon Jackson's car parked and idling, empty, in front of Burt's old yellow clapboard house.

We watched Leon come hurrying out of Burt's place carrying a brown suitcase. He flung open the back door and tossed the suitcase on the back seat, then spun around and jerked open the front passenger door. He rushed back into Burt's

house. A couple of moments later, Leon Jackson holding his arm, Burt Fallows shuffled to the car, folded his walker, and climbed somehow into the front seat. Leon ran around, slid behind the wheel, punched the accelerator so hard that the car threw gravel and stones about, and fishtailed out of town.

"I wonder what that rushing around was all about," Longstreet said when Leon's car was out of sight.

"That looked like a suitcase Leon threw in the back seat."

Longstreet smiled.

"Maybe they're eloping," he said.

A slight (and rare) breeze suddenly kicked up, and when it did, it caught Burt Fallows' old wooden garage door and flung it open wide with a loud bang.

We cut through his lawn to the garage to latch the door shut.

Knowing that no one was at home, I wanted to take a look at Burt's car, particularly at the odometer. It was a 1967 Chevy Impala that he drove only to go the eighteen miles to Kane once or twice a month to get supplies. The car was in cherry condition, and when I peered inside, I saw it only had twelve thousand miles on it. I knew they weren't hard miles either, since Burt always poked along at about thirty-five miles an hour on the highway, much to the irritation of the long line of people always behind him, unable to pass because of the mountain roads.

But as I admired the immaculate condition of the thirty-year-old car, thinking of making Burt an of-

fer, Longstreet puzzled over something else in the corner of Burt's garage.

"Look at this, will you."

I went around and saw that he was inspecting a common wood-handled shovel leaning in the corner. He scraped some thick dirt off the blade and rubbed it so the soil broke up in his fingers.

On the wall directly in front of us I saw where Burt hung his tools: a pickaxe, a rake, a maul for splitting firewood. That old scythe, it was there, too, hanging on the wall. The tools had been well cared for, all of them lightly oiled to prevent rust. There was also an empty spot where, I imagined, the shovel used to hang.

"This dirt on this shovel is fairly fresh," Longstreet said. "In fact, it feels a little moist yet. Probably because it's been in this cool garage out of the sun."

"You can bet old Burt Fallows wasn't using that shovel. He can hardly stand up as it is."

"But Leon Jackson, even with one arm, sure could use it," Longstreet stood up and bent backwards to take a kink out of his back. "And Leon's about the only one who's ever been allowed on this property."

"Then let's get out of here before they come back," I said. "If we get caught here—"

Longstreet closed and latched the garage door, but he didn't leave. Instead he walked around to the back of the garage and surveyed Burt Fallows' acreage.

High weeds had taken over the site where Burt's large garden used to be—in the sunniest spot on the

lot inside a chain link fence built to keep the deer out of his corn. But no garden had been planted inside that fence for several years.

In fact, the weeds Burt so diligently fought with that scythe year after year had pretty much covered the property.

Directly behind the garage was a pile of unsplit firewood that had lain there so long the logs were beginning to rot. There was also a pile of rotted lumber, a couple of old tires, and old roofing shingles that we assumed Burt had meant to burn but never got around to it.

"The full sun hits this property for most of the day," Longstreet said, still slowly scanning Burt's five or six acres of weed-choked land. "That's why he always had such great gardens."

"Which means?" I asked.

"Pretty dry, the soil here I mean, wouldn't you say?"

"Well, there's not much water around here, that's for sure."

"And with our lack of rain lately, the soil here would be all that much dryer."

That stood to reason.

"In fact, the soil here on this property is dryer than the dirt on that shovel in the garage."

I had no idea where he was going with this.

"But the dirt on the shovel a short time ago was probably about as moist as, say, the area dug up around them bones up by the penstock."

"What are you getting at? Are you saying someone, Leon probably, because Burt couldn't, went up there that night and dug up those

bones with that shovel, getting it all muddy? Then they brought the bones down here somewhere, re-buried them, and put the shovel in the garage?" When I thought about it, it seemed believable enough. I felt like a regular Sherlock Holmes. "But who'd he dig up? Charlie Red Feather and Polly Myers? And re-buried them somewhere? Is that what you're getting at? Buried them where?" I asked.

"Nope," Longstreet said. He turned to head for home. "No, they didn't bury them."

What a drop in ego for me, going from being Sherlock Holmes one moment to feeling like a Keystone Kop the next. "I don't understand," I told him truthfully.

"You don't? Why don't you put it in your computer and try to figure it out?"

A few steps later he added, mostly to himself, "Why would Leon use Burt's shovel? He's got shovels of his own."

A late model car was parked in Longstreet's driveway. On the rear window was a small sign that read OLD FOGY ON BOARD.

Sitting at the kitchen table dressed in slacks and a golf shirt, puffing on a cigar which created wafts of smoke as white as his hair, was Tom Favor, Widow Smythe's brother. He was sucking on a beer with Mary.

Although Tom was nearly eighty years old, he was about the most active senior citizen in the county, and certainly the best known. A one-time county commissioner, he

was now director of the Bradford Senior Center, wrote a weekly senior citizen-related newspaper column, had founded the area's advocacy group, Seniors United. He was an avid golfer and tennis player to boot. He was one of those people who, through his actions, told you there's a difference between growing old and acting old.

And what a contrast, I thought, as I sat there listening to Tom chide Mary goodnaturedly—what a contrast between Tom Favor and Leon Jackson even though they were about the same age and had, in fact, grown up together.

"What a lovely, lovely wife you have," Tom said to Longstreet.

Mary blushed.

It had been several years since Tom had visited folks in Westline, so he'd never met Mary before.

"I was about to ask her to come to work for me at the Center," Tom said.

"How much are you paying?" Mary asked, kidding with him, patting his hand. She already had a great job helping run Zippo's new museum.

"Let's see. For someone as lovely as yourself? I'll pay you seven fifty an hour, if you don't make lewd and suggestive remarks to me in the workplace. I'll pay you ten dollars an hour if you do."

"All right," Mary said. "Bennies?"

"What brings you back home," Longstreet asked, chuckling at Tom Favor's offer.

"Just down checking on my sister and she told me Mary had some people in a photo she needed I.D.'d. So I stopped in."

Mary went into the computer room, and a couple of minutes later I heard the printer printing.

Tom Favor and his sister had grown up in Westline, and he lived here until right after he came home from World War II. Almost immediately he went to work at Kendall's refinery, eventually working his way up to an executive position of some kind. Around that time he married and moved to Bradford, where he and his family had lived ever since. His sister kept the family house in Westline, so Tom, until recent years, had stopped in to check on family matters from time to time. Sometimes, in the very early years when Longstreet and I were kids, Tom attended our town picnics with his sister. But it had been a while since we'd seen him at one of those gatherings.

Mary returned with the photo printed out on glossy photo paper. She handed it to him and then from behind, she hugged Longstreet's neck and kissed him on the cheek.

"We want to know who the guy in the back is. The one with sunglasses on," Longstreet said, stroking his wife's hand. "None of us know."

Tom Favor slipped on his glasses, took a long look at the photo, set it down, removed his glasses, and said, "That's Kim."

"Who's Kim?" Mary asked.

"Kim was a friend of Betty and Burt Fallows. Betty's friend really, I think, but a friend to both of them. As I recall, Kim and Betty went to school together before she married Burt."

"Did he always come to the picnics?"

"Ah, let me see, if I remember this right," Tom said, studying the ceiling as if his memories were hanging off the ceiling light like old cobwebs. "As I recall, Kim worked for a company in California. Once a year he'd come east on business, probably by bus or train because back then the airline connections weren't what they are today. Usually his trip was sometime in July, so while he was on the East Coast, he always stopped in to stay with the Fallowses for a few days. That would have been why he was at this picnic." Tom flipped the photo over. "Nineteen forty," he read.

"Whatever happened to him?" Longstreet asked.

"Don't know really. I suspect that after Betty Fallows was killed, he just stopped coming."

Mary got us all another beer.

"You know, I remember when Burt told me he was going down to Lock Haven to work at Piper Cub and that Betty was already there. I remember thinking she shouldn't leave here because she had a great job at Sylvania in Emporium. She'd worked there all through the war years. They made radio tubes, mostly for the military effort, and because all the men were at war, the women went to work in the factories. Girls Town USA, they used to call Emporium because they literally bused women workers in from all the neighboring counties. Betty had worked herself up to a pretty good position at Sylvania by the time Burt got home from the war." He sighed, "Turned out I was right. She shouldn't have left."

"Well, she probably felt she

should be with her husband," Mary said.

"Honey," Tom replied, "that's true. But it was how she quit Sylvania that always puzzled me because she was such a responsible woman. That's what got her promoted through the years."

"What do you mean?" Longstreet asked.

"Well, I'd just joined Kendall about then and was roughnecking some oil sites Kendall had recently drilled in Cameron County, in the Emporium area. One day I needed to get back to Bradford after work, but the crew I was working with wanted to stay down there overnight. So I went over to the Sylvania plant where Betty Fallows worked to bum a ride back north with her. By this time she was driving her own car the fifty miles back and forth between work and home. The buses were done. But when I asked to see her, I was told no one had seen Betty Fallows in days and that they assumed she'd quit working but she never gave any notice, never said goodbye, no going away party. I always thought that was strange, so very unlike her to up and quit just like that, giving no two-week notice or nothing."

Tom peeled the label off the beer bottle and rolled the damp paper into a small ball between his fingers. "Rosie the Riveter," he said, smiling to himself, still lingering in those days. "That's who Betty Fallows best exemplified. Rosie the Riveter was the symbol of women working to support the war effort. Funny how the times changed."

Tom sipped his beer, sadness creeping into his eyes. "We had Rosie the Riveter supporting the GI's in World War II. A few years later our young men fighting in Vietnam had Jane Fonda." His voice dropped to a lower, slower tone. "I tell people that when I hear them demeaning Vietnam vets the way some of them still do—mostly them World War II vets ridiculing the Vietnam vets, telling them they lost the war. I tell them that no public support represented a big difference in many ways between the wars and that it wasn't the Vietnam vets' fault. They were as brave as any soldiers who've ever fought in any of our wars."

It was so quiet and still in the kitchen you could hear a slight breeze outside brushing through the leaves in the trees.

We all knew Tom Favor had lost his only son in Vietnam.

To break free of the darkening solemnity that enveloped us all, I said, "Well, would this Kim guy have been in World War II? Probably was, wasn't he? He'd been old enough to enlist."

"Kim?" Tom Favor said with surprise. "No, no. I'm sorry. I should have told you. Kim wouldn't have been in the service. If anything he would have been in one of those camps. I always figured he got thrown into one."

"Camps?" Longstreet asked.

"Yes, those internment camps they built. Kim—Kim Komatsu was his name—was Japanese. Japanese-American. You can't tell in this photo because of his sunglasses. Back then they rounded

up a lot of Japanese living in this country, as a security measure they said, and put them in temporary camps—prisons, really. And Kim would have hated that. He wouldn't have gone quietly."

"Japanese?" Longstreet said. "This Kim guy is Japanese?" He poked the photo hard with his finger.

"As Japanese as Hirohito himself," Tom Favor said.

PART III PRISONS

I reread the only thing I had typed into my computer: Too many people live in the prisons of old ideas—prisons that have been built for them, but often, too often, prisons they've built for themselves.

I suppose I could have written about the similarities between mental prisons and real prisons of steel bars and barbed wire meant to confine people, taking away their freedom, caging them, making them less than human.

Mental prisons of any kind do the same thing to a man, as we soon found out.

Instead of typing, I snatched yet another of my wife's cigarettes, crumpled the empty pack, and thought about how, right after Tom Favor left and Longstreet and me and Mary were lounging on their porch in the late afternoon that day, Doc Hume called.

Longstreet came back out to the porch after taking the call from the veterinarian. He plopped down in

one of the green plastic porch chairs and heaved a sigh, studying the area where his lawn and the forest line met.

A chipmunk darted back and forth on a partly rotted log, and Longstreet watched with some amusement as it scampered first in one direction, then quickly reversed itself and ran in the other direction, then reversed itself again, back and forth, back and forth along that log, never seeming to tire. "What did Doc Hume say?" I asked.

"Well," he said slowly, "it's like this. He said after consulting with his anthropologist buddy, they determined that the first jawbone, the one the dog brought home, was the jawbone of a white woman, probably in her late teens, mid-twenties. She could have been buried there as long as fifty years, which would take it back to the mid to late 1940's."

Longstreet's beagle stood up from where he had been stretched out in the sun on the porch floor. He ambled over to Longstreet and raised up on his haunches so that his front paws and head rested on Longstreet's lap. He promptly fell asleep like that, standing up.

Longstreet gently stroked the dog's long, silky ears as he spoke. "Doc Hume said the second jawbone was not Caucasian. It was, however, a male and about the same age as the female and buried probably about the same time. They figured it was an Indian, but they only arrived at that, he said, because we have so many Indians around here."

"Polly Myers and Charlie Red Feather—" I started to say.

"Wait," Longstreet said. "I asked Doc Hume if the second jawbone could possibly be Japanese and not Indian, and right away he said, 'Why would you ask that?' He went on to say that his friend at Pitt, who's more knowledgeable about these things, his first reaction was that the second bone could very well be Asian. But they settled on an Indian, going with the odds. They really need more bones to be more accurate."

I said, "So that would give us possibly Kim Komatsu and Betty Fallows? Is that what you're saying?"

"Or," Longstreet added, "Polly Myers and Charlie Red Feather."

"Or," I said, "two people we've never heard of."

We both watched the chipmunk as it continued to scamper first in one direction, then in the other.

"Why would you ask Doc Hume if the one bone could have been Japanese?"

"Because of that shovel," Longstreet said.

"The shovel?"

"Someone from this town went up there and dug those bones up because they knew we'd be digging around the penstock," Longstreet said. "And I'll bet you that mud-caked shovel, which is in Burt Fallows' garage, mind you, is what was used to dig up there. Where else is there mud around here, except by them water leaks?"

"And from that you're inferring Kim Komatsu and Betty Fallows?"

"Well, she's the only one we know for sure is dead."

"Killed in an industrial accident."

"Was she?" He threw the question out into the still evening air, aimed at no one in particular.

Mary asked if anyone needed anything, and when we said no, she said, "Well, I do," and she got up to get herself another beer. So, we ordered another one, too, because we hated to see her drink alone.

"What do you know about the Bataan Death March?" Longstreet asked.

"Pretty grueling, I know that. Philippine Islands. Early part of the war with Japan."

"You don't hear much about it," Longstreet added.

"No, you don't. In fact, I'd guess more people know the details of the My Lai massacre better than they know the Bataan Death March." I envisioned Tom Favor nodding agreement—My Lai representing the anti-war side; anti-American involvement side; anti-public support side of the Vietnam War.

Mary came out with three beers.

Suddenly a brilliant idea occurred to me. I took a long swig of my beer, shoring myself up, preparing for the worst, an argument from Longstreet, then said, "You want to know more about the Bataan Death March?"

"Yeah. I'd like to know more about what Burt Fallows went through."

I rose. "Then let's find it on the Internet together. I'll bet there's lots of information there."

To my surprise and without even a hint of an argument, Longstreet nodded okay, took the dog from his lap, and pulled himself out of the

chair to follow me inside. I watched Mary raise a clenched fist of victory. Longstreet didn't see that, though.

We pulled up chairs around the computer, and I typed "Bataan Death March" in a search engine.

Thirty-seven links to sites came up.

I clicked on one put together by vets who'd actually endured the Death March; they called themselves the Battling Bastards of Bataan.* Scrolling down, we finally read under "Outline of Events":

"On April ninth, 1942, Gen. King surrendered his forces on Bataan after the Japanese had broken through the Fil-American last main line of resistance.

"The Japanese assembled their captive Fil-American soldiers in the various sectors in Bataan, but mainly at Mariveles, the southern most tip of the Peninsula. Although American trucks were available to transport the prisoners, the Japanese decided to march the Defenders of Bataan to their destinations. This march came to be known as the 'Death March.'

"The 'Death March' was really a series of marches, which lasted from five to nine days. The distance a captive had to march was determined by where on the trail the captive began the march.

"The basic trail of the 'Death March' was as follows: a 55-mile march from Mariveles, Bataan, to San Fernando, Pangpanga. At San Fernando, the prisoners were placed into train-cars, made for

cargo, and railed to Capas, Tarlac, a distance of around 24 miles. Dozens died standing up in the railroad cars, as the cars were so cramped that there was no room for the dead to fall. They were, then, marched another six miles to their final destination, Camp O'Donnell.

"Several thousand men died on the 'Death March.' Many died, because they were not in any physical condition to undertake such a march. Once on the march, they were not given any food or water. Japanese soldiers killed many of them through various means. Also, POW's were repeatedly beaten and treated inhumanely as they marched."

I scrolled farther down.

"Due to the high death rate in Camp O'Donnell, the Japanese transferred all Americans to Cabanatuan, north of Camp O'Donnell, on June 6, 1942. . . .

"Cabanatuan, for most prisoners, ended up being a temporary camp. The Japanese had a policy (which was a direct violation of the Geneva Convention) that prisoners were to be used as a source of labor. They sent most of the prisoners, from Cabanatuan, to various other camps in the Philippines, China, Japan, and Korea, where they were used as slave labor. Some worked in mines, others in farms, others in factories, and others unloading ships in Port Areas, for the remainder of the war. Each subsequent prison camp, after Cabanatuan, has a story of its own. . . .

"These prisoners endured the

*http://home.pacbell.net/fbaldie/Battling_Bastards_of_Bataan.html

whims of their brutal captors, with similar conditions and mistreatment as those experienced in the 'Death March,' and Camp O'Donnell, and the uncertainty of when, if ever, their captivity would end.

"... After they were released, these men were sent to various military hospitals for physical examinations. Many of their ailments, due to malnutrition, went undiagnosed. Many of the systemic fevers they had contracted went undiagnosed. More importantly, the psychological scars they suffered were never recognized. It was not until years after the Vietnam War, the U.S. government recognized "Post Traumatic Stress Disorder" or PTSD as a legitimate disorder. It is safe to say, each of these men has carried these scars for the rest of their lives, and indirectly, so did their families."

"Christ," Longstreet bolted back into his seat. "Burt Fallows went through that? Grueling ain't the word for it. That makes My Lai look like a picnic." Then he quickly pointed at another link. "Go there. Do that one." When I hesitated, he leaned forward impatiently, and grabbed the mouse (not a frog) and clicked.

That brought up a site exhibiting Ben Steele's drawings of life in a Japanese POW camp.* Steele had been a prisoner of war.

Longstreet clicked on a picture link. A picture loaded onto the screen, a grim painting showing American POW's with black, hol-

low sockets where their eyes should have been, rib cages protruding, no more meat on their bodies than those jawbones had. The scene was Camp O'Donnell.

We slumped back in our chairs simultaneously, aghast.

"That poor man," Mary said of Burt Fallows.

That pretty much summed up what we all felt.

We spent some time reading through a few more Death March websites. The only other item of note was that after they were released, many of the former Bataan POW's were shunned by other World War II vets because the men at Bataan had surrendered. Few, it seemed, took into consideration that the men at Bataan surrendered as a unit because they were ordered to surrender.

Back out on the porch, we found that daylight was dimming as the sun slipped behind the high mountains that formed the western wall of the valley. The air cooled—not enough to don a sweater or a light longsleeved shirt, but it got cool enough that even a blind man would have known it was growing dark.

Deepening shadows crept across Longstreet's yard.

We sat in the plastic chairs with the beagle sleeping on the porch floor between us.

"Do you believe in that 'delayed stress' stuff you used to hear so much about regarding Vietnam veterans?" Longstreet asked.

*<http://www.artmontana.com/article/steele/wtrln.html>

"Oh yes. I believe there's something to it, yes. It's when pride has a meltdown and turns to shame. Or to anger or depression. Usually all three."

"Feldman had it, you know."

"Feldman?" I asked, surprised. I'd never seen any sign of it, but Feldman wasn't someone you could get very close to. He was the only guy in Westline who'd served in Vietnam. Army, Central Highlands, 4th Division, he told me once. He spoke very little of his army days, but I knew he'd been in the thick of things and was wounded.

"Don't you ever tell him I told you this," Longstreet admonished.

"Mum's the word."

He nodded. "He called me one night about two in the morning. This was a few years after he'd come home. He wanted me to pick him up in Bradford, where he'd been drinking hard."

Feldman was a big, strapping guy but short-fused; he didn't take much crap from anybody. After his time in the service, he drifted around quite a bit the first few years, always getting into fights, in and out of jail, and almost always drunk, until Smitty hired him full-time to work in his garage repairing trucks. That seemed to have leveled him out. Feldman could throw a truck tire around like he was throwing a Frisbee.

"He had a lot of problems back then, I guess," Longstreet continued. "He sounded real bad. Not just drunk, which he was, but more down than I'd ever heard or seen him. But the girl he was dating at the time had just given him the

walk; he hadn't been able to find any work to speak of; he had very little money. And about that time, as you'll remember, a group of them Vietnam boat people were arriving, sponsored by some church group, and these refugees were given housing and some kind of job and probably money to live on until they got on their feet. That had many of the area Vietnam veterans up in arms—especially those out of work—some threatening to go on a shooting spree. They more or less saw those refugees as the enemy, I guess.

"So I got out of bed and went and got Feldman. I didn't want him driving home drunk or doing something really stupid. The fact that he called me told me something was drastically wrong. He'd already been involved in one fight that night and was picking another when I got there."

"You're a decent Joe to go get him at that time of the morning."

"I can be, yeah. Hell, why not? He's a good friend," he said. "But on the way back in my truck is when it all came gushing out of him, just like someone had busted a big gaping hole in the Grand Coulee Dam. First, he bitched about them boat people, then his girlfriend, then his work situation. 'I can't free myself from it,' he said. 'Why can't I get away from it?'"

"Suddenly out of nowhere he was gushing tears that came up from belly deep, crying and blubbering so bad I could hardly understand him."

"His defense mechanisms fell," I said.

"Something happened. I know this, he was giving himself a real beating. But he wasn't just crying over his girlfriend or no work or not having any money or them boat people. No, sir. What came out of him spewed from deep inside his guts; a nasty, sour thing that had been festering inside wanting and needing to come out for years. And he kept repeating over and over, 'Send us back. We'll beat them this time.'"

When pride has a meltdown and turns to shame, I thought. I said to Longstreet, "That's what Tom Favor was driving at when he mentioned demeaning those vets. Some of them took a lot of crap from folks about losing the war."

"I got a Purple Heart and a Bronze Star," he said, "but I've got no job. I've got no girlfriend. I've got no life to speak of." I knew then what was really bothering him—Vietnam and everything thereafter—but there wasn't much I could do or say about it except listen and let him cry."

"He was really down."

"All the way to the bottom. So after I took him home and put him to bed, I went through his place and took all his guns and put them in my truck."

"So he wouldn't go on a rampage with guns blazing?"

"So he wouldn't hurt himself," Longstreet said. He reached down and scratched the dog. "The next morning he called me, thanked me, asked me not to say anything about it to no one. He's never mentioned it since."

I thought a moment, envisioning

two hundred pound Feldman with the large, callused hands of a worker and a fighter reduced to blubbering like a child in Longstreet's truck. Powerful stuff the mind is, to be able to bring down something that big and tough, to crumble a man that size. It was probably the only fight Feldman ever lost. I asked Longstreet, "Why'd you bring that up? About Feldman, I mean."

"Because of what we read about the Death March. About the psychological scars guys like Burt Fallows must have had—or still have. If one year in Vietnam could do that to Feldman, think what a Death March and three years as a POW might do."

"Screw him up bad."

"Real bad," Longstreet added.

We both looked over to where we could see Burt Fallows' house. Normally, we'd almost always see a small light on somewhere inside the gloomy home, or the flickering gray light of a TV, but that night it was pitch black in the house and we knew that wherever Burt and Leon had hurried off to earlier, suitcase and all, they hadn't gotten back yet. At least, Burt hadn't.

Mary left, saying she was going to get dinner ready and work on her photos.

Longstreet was eyeing the darkening shape of Burt's property still. "Burt rarely leaves any more. We aren't going to have another chance," he said finally. "Let's go over and look around his place some more while he's gone."

"It's getting dark. And what are we going to be looking for?"

"Them bones that got dug up.

We'll take the beagle. It may be getting dark and his eyes may be going, but his sniffer's still good. If they come back while we're there, we'll tell them the dog got loose and we were just trying to catch it. The beagle got us into this in the first place, let's see if he can get us out."

"Them bones are gone, man. If they were ever over there."

"You have to remember," Longstreet said, reaching for the dog's long leash. "They don't know we have those jawbones. They may have seen that some animal was digging around up there, but they wouldn't know what kind of animal. Could have been a coon, a fox, a coyote. So they might not be in any hurry to get rid of them. All they wanted to do was to get those bones out from around that penstock because they knew we'd be digging there in a few days."

"They?"

"They. Leon and Burt."

"Why don't we check out Leon's place, then?"

"We will. Tomorrow. When Leon and his wife are in church. We'll take the dog then, too. Same story. But I honestly don't think we'll have to check Leon's."

Longstreet stood up and snapped the leash onto the dog's collar. The dog stood, too, knowing he was going somewhere.

"Why won't we have to check Leon's property?"

"Back to that shovel."

"You've fallen in love with that shovel."

"I keep asking myself," Longstreet said, stepping off the porch with the dog tugging on the leash

and me trailing behind, "why would Leon use Burt's shovel?"

"I'm not following you."

"Let's just suppose, just suppose, that back in the forties Leon somehow lures Charlie Red Feather and Polly Myers down here and in a fit of rage kills them for taking his arm. He buries them up there by the penstock. And he gets away with it. Years later we come along and are about to dig near their graves. Leon goes up to get the remains out. Honestly—ask yourself honestly—why would he go over and borrow Burt's shovel to do that? He's got his own shovels."

We neared Burt's house, and I glanced nervously up and down the dirt road, looking for the headlights of Leon Jackson's car.

Longstreet was still calculating. "But," he said, "if for some unknown reason Burt killed Kim Komatsu and Betty Fallows, buried them up there, and then had to go get those bones fifty years later but was in no shape physically to do that, he just might call his good friend Leon Jackson to help him. And that's why Leon might have used Burt's shovel. And that would also explain why a very responsible Betty Fallows never gave any notice at Sylvania about leaving. She had no idea she was leaving. Leaving this world, I mean."

"And you don't think they reburied them somewhere else?"

"Well, not with that shovel in Burt's garage, they didn't. It's still got mud on it. All that mud would have been scraped off if they'd used it to to rebury the bones in this dry ground."

"What if the bones were in the suitcase?" I asked Longstreet.

"Then they're gone for good. In the landfill. In someone's dumpster. Buried somewhere out there using one of Leon's shovels." With a nod he indicated the miles of deep forest around us. "But we won't know until we check, now will we?"

He unlatched the gate to the chain link fence behind Burt's house and garage, unsnapped the leash, and set the dog free. Beau's nose went straight to the ground, as he roamed around in the weeds that were once Burt Fallows' garden.

The dog found nothing to excite him inside the fence.

We then let the beagle wander around the weedy area outside the fence, crisscrossing it, still with his nose to the ground like a vacuum cleaner sucking up scent, scurrying here and there. But he found nothing there either to get him bay-ing or digging.

Next Longstreet led the dog over to the pile of rotten boards and roofing shingles and tires.

And that perked the dog right up.

Old Beau immediately starting scratching and pawing and whining at the pile of burnables. But the rotted stuff was too heavy for him to move, so Longstreet reached down and flipped a couple of the boards off the pile.

There, hidden in the middle of the scrap lumber, was a large plastic garbage bag. Fairly new, too.

Longstreet didn't need to open it for us to see what was in it. When he lifted it, sticking out from the plastic we saw the white bone of a

finger poking through the side of the bag.

We opened it anyway and peered in. A strong, sickening stench of musty, half-rotted bones hit us square in the face.

"What are you kids doing here?"

The voice from behind us was husky and deep, coming from the shadows between the garage and the house, and it startled me momentarily. I turned to face the silhouette of a man with a suitcase in his left hand. There was no right hand, only the stub of an amputated arm dangling.

"Leave that be," Leon Jackson said to Longstreet. "Just leave the bag be."

Longstreet set the bag of bones down and secured the beagle to the chain link fence. "Who do we have in here, Leon?" Longstreet asked lifting the bag again.

Leon set the suitcase down but said nothing.

"We've got Betty Fallows and Kim Komatsu in here, don't we?"

"You got no need to know. It doesn't concern you."

Leon's car was nowhere around, so I guessed he'd walked down from his house to Burt's. But apparently Burt wasn't with him because there were still no lights on in the Fallows house.

"Where's Burt?" Longstreet asked. "I suspect old Burt knows who's in this bag."

"Let it be," Leon said. "It makes no difference now."

"Where's Burt Fallows?" Longstreet asked again, more forcefully.

The old man heaved what seemed like all the breath out of

him in one long sigh. He reached down and popped the suitcase open. Out rolled some clothing and a shaving kit, spilling out onto the ground. "Burt Fallows is dead. He died just a couple of hours ago."

Stunned, we didn't say anything, so Leon continued. "He called me early this afternoon and said he was having severe chest pains. He'd been having trouble with his heart. That's why he'd packed this suitcase to take with him if he ever had to hurry to the hospital. I got him to the hospital as quick as I could, and they worked on him, but he had one massive one there in the emergency room. I just come down to return his suitcase and make sure his place was locked up."

Longstreet set the bag of bones down.

"So, it makes no difference anymore. You kids got no need to know. Just leave that and go home."

"We're not kids," Longstreet said. "We're both thirty-nine years old, Leon. And I do have a need to know why Burt would kill his wife and her friend."

"Just give me the bag. I'll dispose of them properly, if that's what's bothering you. I was going to just burn them in the pile of rubbish when the outdoor-burning ban got lifted."

"Two murders is what bothers me," Longstreet said. "Are you going to tell us what happened?"

"No."

Longstreet handed me the bag, unhooked the dog, and made a step to leave. "Then I know the police are going to be bothered by a couple of murders, too. Murders that, I

point out to you, Leon, you are an accomplice to. After the fact, maybe even before the fact, I don't know. We'll let the police figure that out."

Leon closed the suitcase and lowered himself down on it, straddling it. As Longstreet took a couple more steps, the old man said in a more subdued, tired tone, "Okay, okay. If I tell you what happened, then what?"

"Then I'll decide from there."

Knowing he was trapped, Leon rubbed his stub gently and squinted into the dark sky of near night.

"Burt come home from the war and from the prisons he'd been in, and those hospitals," Leon said finally. "I don't know how he found out. I think he told me Betty told him, or he saw signs of it, but apparently that Jap, Kim Komatsu, had hidden out in this house nearly all through the war."

"He stayed here?" Longstreet asked pointing at Burt Fallows' dark, empty house. "Kim Komatsu lived here?"

"All through the war," Leon repeated. "He was afraid he'd be put in an internment camp in California. Betty was his friend, so she hid him out. She went to work every day, and he stayed inside out of sight. I guess he hid in the attic if someone come over to visit."

"It's understandable, her wanting to protect him." I said. "He'd be almost a prisoner himself."

"That might be," Leon said, "But all that time Burt's being held prisoner overseas. Only his prison's a lot worse—beaten, starved, tormented by his Jap captors—one Jap guard in particular."

I set the bag of bones down, away from the dog.

"You called them friends," Leon said. "Well, a man and a woman under those conditions can't live together for long before something else might happen. Friends? Sure they were friends. And they got to be even better than friends."

"And Burt found out when he returned," Longstreet said.

"She told him. A few months after he got home, she told him. Kim Komatsu was gone by then. Betty told Burt she waited until he got home from the war. She said she wasn't even sure he was still alive after all those years. But she told him she'd fallen in love with the Jap through the years. He told me she said, 'I didn't mean to, it just happened,' and that she was going out west to be with him. And sure enough, that Jap comes back to pick her up. And there's old Burt with all them angry, hateful memories of his days as a POW being brutalized by his Jap guards. Wasn't smart at all of Kim to come back, not at that time anyway. He should never have come back. But he did. If Betty had just left, just gone, by herself, quietly, saying nothing—"

Leon stood and gently pushed Burt's belongings back into the suitcase.

"But Burt was a changed man by then, changed from that gentle, happy, carefree image of a man and his new bride you saw in the photo your wife brought."

"How long have you known about this?" Longstreet asked.

Leon thought a moment. "He told me, oh, ten years after it happened.

Couldn't live with it no more by himself, I guess."

Longstreet turned to leave, but Leon stopped him.

"Don't you want to know why he killed them?"

"I can already guess why."

"How he killed them?"

We didn't answer. But we didn't leave either.

"He hacked them up with that scythe in there." Leon nodded towards the garage. "Caught Betty and that Jap smooching in there, and seeing that, even though he knew they were leaving, set him off."

"Burt told me he didn't remember picking up the scythe. All he remembered was hacking away finally at his Jap guard, lashing out, swinging that thing, finally getting the chance to kill the guard who had beat and starved and humiliated him and his buddies day in, day out, for three long years. The Jap guard who had taken his life away was now taking his wife away. That's how Burt saw it."

"But it wasn't a Japanese soldier," Longstreet said. "It was Kim Komatsu. And Betty, Burt's wife."

"Burt didn't know that. Not in his enraged state of mind. The next day he woke up right there in the garage and there they lay and Burt's got their blood all over him, he said. No way was he going back to another prison. Not for killing a Japanese; not after what he'd been through. So he buried them up by the penstock. We'd been digging around there back then, fixing a leak, and Burt figured if anyone saw fresh dirt dug up they'd as-

sume it had to do with the waterline."

"Then he made up the story about going to Piper Cub to work." Longstreet said.

Leon nodded. "He just lived there for a while, then came back, telling everyone she died down there. Folks had too much pity for Burt for anyone to question it."

The three of us stood there for what seemed like an eternity in the pale light of the moon rising before Leon said. "Now I told you. So what are you going to do?"

I had to admit I was curious too about what Longstreet might do. I knew he had no love for Leon Jackson and no need whatsoever to protect him. In fact, he had old Leon right where he wanted him. I looked over at him, awaiting his answer.

"What's right," Longstreet said. And we walked out of Burt Fallows' yard carrying the bag of remains of Kim Komatsu and Betty Fallows. "I'll do what's right."

EPILOGUE

We finished laying and backfilling the blue waterline a few days later, tying into the penstock at about eleven at night, working in the headlights of our trucks. Our worst fear was that the four inch line was not going to be big enough, just like Leon Jackson had been telling us, and that we'd all be eating crow with nothing to wash it down with.

But Longstreet and me went up to check the water level in the pen-

stock early the next morning. Before we even got to it, we could see that the water had risen above even the overflow pipe and was pouring over the top of the penstock. There was more water collected there than anyone, even Leon Jackson, could remember.

And just like that, our water problems were solved.

That afternoon I stepped into Longstreet's house. Mary had her head down on the kitchen table.

I heard Longstreet calling out from the computer room, "Look at that, will you! Honey, I need our credit card number. Here's that gun for forty dollars cheaper than it was in the magazine. Unbelievable."

Mary raised her head, her expression awash with disbelief. "He's been on the computer all day," she said. "I can't get him off it. He won't let me on it. I'm afraid I've awakened the sleeping giant and sent him forever roaming the corridors of cyberspace."

"How'd you get him on it?"

"I don't know. really. Yesterday, out of the blue, he told me to show him how to run the computer. He said, 'I'm not a young Leon Jackson.'"

Well, good, I thought. More freedom for him.

But from the computer room Longstreet called out again. "Wow, look at those women—"

Mary suddenly bolted from her chair, saying to me, "Oops. Time for another lesson." She headed for the computer, telling her husband, "Get off those pages. You don't need to look at those women. You've got me."

Amen to that, I thought. I got myself a beer out of their fridge, thinking that even freedom has its pitfalls. That was something we might have to work on.

I reached down and scratched the beagle's head as he lay sleeping on a throw rug in front of the kitchen sink.

And those bones?

What Longstreet did with those remains was the right thing to do in more ways than even he recognized, I think.

The day after we took them from Burt Fallows' property, we reburied what was left of Kim Komatsu and Betty Fallows in a spot on Longstreet's property beyond the rotted log the chipmunk had been playing on.

"Betty Fallows and Kim Komatsu are dead," he reasoned, "and there's nothing we can do about that. Burt Fallows is dead, too. And when you think about it, the only thing Leon Jackson is guilty of is being a friend to Burt Fallows."

We were setting large rocks on the gravesite to keep wild animals (and the beagle) from digging up the remains again.

"You've got to admire that in old Leon," Longstreet said. "He's got a nasty disposition and is as ornery as a rattlesnake and probably always will be, but you've got to admire the fact that he took the risk of being involved in this by saying nothing all these years just to protect a friend."

I wasn't surprised that Longstreet would admire that quality in Leon more than, say, the medals Leon earned.

Scanning the western horizon where it sure looked like thunderheads were building, I viewed what Burt Fallows went through a bit differently from Longstreet.

In my mind, after doing what he'd done to his wife and Kim Komatsu, old Burt Fallows had simply become a prisoner again. Instead of barbed wire, he became imprisoned by his deed and all the guilt associated with that. While we saw Burt as a recluse when we were growing up, I realized suddenly that he'd been more like a prisoner in a prison of his own making, and old Leon Jackson through the years had been his only visitor. Kicking a little dirt around the grave, I remembered Burt Fallows working out in that hot field, punishing himself with that scythe.

"We can do Leon this favor, I suppose," Longstreet was leaning on his shovel.

"It's the decent thing to do," I told him. Longstreet would discover on his own that by helping Leon out, by not turning him in to the police—by doing someone you can't stand a favor—you somehow free your own self from your hatred and anger. So, the way I figured it, our simple act of reburying the remains had actually set two people free, Leon and Longstreet.

UNSOLVED

Robert Kesling

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the June issue.

"Good news!" declared Sam Lambert as he stuck his head in at the doorway.

"I could use some," growled DEA agent Vic Rickard. "I've been trying to track down that druglord Terry Berry, or whatever alias he's using now. The guy's slipperier than a bucket of greased eels."

"Hey, that's what I'm trying to tell you, partner. I've got a lead on him and the woman believed to be his wife. And right this minute they're less than a hundred miles away."

"Where?" Vic suddenly got up from his desk.

"Out at Pickerel Lake. They've taken one of the cottages on the north shore of the lake."

Vic frowned. "Your informant was *sure* about this?"

"He convinced me. Described Berry to a T—height, weight, even the scar on his right cheek. Everything fits. He is now posing as a writer."

"Not a bad cover," Vic conceded. "That can explain to his neighbors why he's away so often—gathering background for his great Midwestern novel or some such claptrap. Any idea what name he's going by now?"

"My informant didn't know that. Let's run out to Pickerel Lake right away. If we locate the bastard, we can move in with a SWAT team."

The two agents left their Minneapolis office and two hours later pulled into the village of Pickerel Lake. They noted that there were seven cottages along the north shore of the lake, numbered one through seven from west to east.

As they started their investigation, Sam whispered, "Let's pretend we're taking a survey. Everybody's taking surveys nowadays."

Sam and Vic soon discovered that each man living there followed a different profession (one was a carpenter).

Their husbands were not at home, but all the housewives responded eagerly to the fabricated questions. They also revealed that:

(1) No husband and wife shared the same first initial, so Andy wasn't married to Alice, Bill wasn't married to Betsy, and so on. One wife was named Carol.

(2) Some of the seven women had blonde hair, some had red hair,

and some had dark hair. No two next-door neighbors had the same color hair.

(3) Mrs. Tyler (who wasn't Ellen) lived somewhere east of the electrician's wife and somewhere west of Gigi, although she was separated from each of them by one or more cottages. Their husbands included Andy, Bill, and Chet.

(4) Ellen resided somewhere east of Dan's wife and somewhere west of Mrs. Orson. Each of them had different colored hair. Their husbands were the plumber, the architect, and the contractor.

(5) The brickmason lived east of Betsy's husband and west of Earl (who wasn't the "writer") but was not next door to either. Their last names were (in one order or another) Purdy, Queen, and Roche.

(6) Both Fred (who was not Mr. Queen) and the "writer" lived west of Mr. Purdy. Their wives included Alice, Dolly, and Flora, two of whom shared the same color hair. Alice's next-door neighbor on the east had red hair.

(7) The adjacent neighbors of the "writer" were Gus on the west and Mr. Roche on the east. Mr. Roche did not occupy cottage number 6.

(8) Mr. Smith lived just west of a blonde wife; so did the plumber.

(9) Bill's home was just west of Mr. Smith's. Bill's wife wasn't blonde, and Mr. Smith's wife wasn't redhaired.

(10) The architect had Mr. Unser as his next-door neighbor on the west and Andy (who wasn't married to Flora) as his next-door neighbor on the east. Mr. Unser was not in cottage number 1.

"Well," remarked Sam Lambert as they returned to their car, "that has to be our man. The "writer" is in cottage number _____."

"Right," agreed Vic Rickard, "and is he in for a surprise tonight!"

Under what name was the druglord hiding out at Pickerel Lake? What name was his wife using? In which cottage were they staying?

See page 114 for the solution to the April puzzle.



Oh, Mona

Dan A. Sproul

Miami is a seasonal city. Things tend to diminish in the summer. Traffic jams are smaller; so also is the price of a hotel room. Calder racetrack produces scrawny race cards and puny mutuel handles. The private detective business suffers, too. Like everything else, the P.I. business goes into a wait-and-hold mode until the first snowflake plummets earthward in Canada, New York, and New Jersey. Then things pick up.

The pivotal date is October fifteenth. Along about then begins a direct corollary between the influx of visitors and the increasing day rate at the Miami Beach hotels. Horses begin to ship into Calder for the Tropical meet. Life gets a little less laid back.

At Standard Investigations we gear up for the season by making sure the phone bill is paid. I use the plural pronoun *we* strictly in an editorial sense. There is only I, Joe Standard, sole proprietor, except on those rare occasions when my good friend Frankie Swinehart, or Swine as he prefers to be called, comes in to assist me. Normally Swine toils as a security guard at Calder Race Course. It works out for him, since he can get paid and lose it back without leaving the premises, thus embracing the economy of saving time and mileage. Swine is incapable of winning any kind of substantial bet on a horse. And worse, he's been unable to absorb this awful truth even though it has been demonstrated relentlessly by more than twenty years of betting with both hands.

Along with the lack of mental acuity necessary to master the fine art of handicapping, the fates dealt him a vicious blow in the looks department as well. Swine confronts the world with hyperthyroid, cueball-like eyes and teeth with a crooked and pronounced buck. He never had much luck with the girls. What he did have was honesty, loyalty, and a tender-hearted simplicity that belied his looks. I guess that's why it was so difficult for me to believe Ordway Crook when he called to tell me that Swine had been arrested for the murder of his girlfriend, Mona Phillips.

Ordway Crook, as you might guess from his name, was a lawyer, a divorce lawyer to be precise. We had a sort of business relationship. Certain of my cases produced a disgruntled spouse from time to time. I referred these unfortunates to Crook. He in turn paid me a small referral fee.

"They got in a fight," said Crook over the phone. "He beat her up pretty good. The cops at the scene say it looks like she might have cracked the back of her head on the corner of a small refrigerator in his room when he knocked her down."

"What does Swine say?" I asked.

"Says he didn't do it. What else? That's what they all say." There was a slight pause. I half anticipated what was coming next. "You know I don't do pro bono work," he continued. "The court will appoint him a public defender. But I promised him I'd call you. He said you were tight with Donk Nolan, the bondsman. He wants you to arrange bail."

"How much?"

"A hundred thousand."

At the onset there were several things that went contrary to all reason, the first being that Swine had a girlfriend; the second, that he was able to get *any* female inside the gopher hole he lived in.

I'd done skip trace work for Donk Nolan. Tight wasn't the way I'd have described our relationship. We weren't tight. We were loose. I didn't particularly like Donk. He demonstrated with enduring passion that he liked me even less, but rarely to my face. Bitterness, mistrust, an unrestrained caustic disposition—it was in his genes. Possibly these attributes are a requirement for any successful bail bondsman.

Donk would require ten percent up front to post the bond: ten thousand. I had the money. Business had been good. My interest in Down and Out Stables was paying off. Best of all, I'd quit betting the gimmicks at the track. Win bets only—good money management. I was pulling it in steadily. In The Bag Boyd had set me up a stock portfolio. Last I looked, it was near thirty grand. But the thing was, I'd been tapped out most of my adult life. Whatever the odds are that the Second Coming will happen next Tuesday, double them. That's about the chance of my handing ten thousand of my own money over to Donk Nolan. There was another way. I picked up the phone.

"Standard? It must be Halloween. What the hell do you want?"

"I need a favor."

"That's rich," he said, and hung up the phone.

I called him back.

"Nolan Bail Bonds," he answered.

"Kyle Breen," I said. "What's it worth to you if I bring him in?"

"Standard, my old buddy. You said you wasn't interested in Breen. I got Golby on it."

"Golby puts his shirt on backwards," I said. "Breen's too mean for him. He'll hurt him bad and enjoy the hell out of it. Golby knows it. He won't go anywhere near Breen. You know it, too. Why do you think I didn't want to fool with him? But things change. How much are you on the hook for with Breen?"

"What you want to know for?"

"I want to make a deal."

"A deal? You want a deal? Okay, I got his mother's house, but it's only worth about a hundred and sixty G's. Kyle's bond is a hundred and seventy-five thousand, and I'm gonna lose my fee. There ain't much time. What kind of deal you talkin'?"

"Swine's in the Dade County lockup. I need you to go down and post his bail—a hundred thousand. And I want you to waive the ten thousand fee."

"Yeah right. So when that little bug-eyed jerk takes off and you don't show up with Breen, I'm out of business."

"Think positive. I'll get Breen. If I don't, I'll work the ten thousand off. Swine won't go anywhere. I'll make sure of that."

"If I weren't desperate, I'd tell you to shove it."

"I know you would."

A brief pause ensued. "All right, it's a deal," said Donk. "But you only got three days."

I told Donk to bring the papers

on Kyle and meet me outside the courthouse. Kyle Breen, six foot six, two hundred seventy pounds, played backup tight end for the Jets for six years. He was kicked out of the NFL because of a manslaughter charge for killing a man in a barroom fight. After that, he turned ugly—arrested for assault during the commission of a crime. Served only about three years. One detective lost an eye trying to take him the last time.

I'd educated myself on Kyle's history when Donk offered me the job originally. It's always a good idea to know what you're dealing with. I turned Donk down because I'm not that young any more . . . and not that hungry. Besides, you don't stay all that fit if the only exercise in the sport you enjoy involves flipping pages in the *Form* and walking back and forth from the track parking lot. Then too, the idea of Donk, the greedy little weasel, dropping fifteen or twenty thousand kind of gave me a warm feeling all over. But . . . things change.

Outside the county jail Swine was jubilant. He gave me an awkward hug. Donk handed me the sheet on Kyle. "A bench warrant's been issued," Donk said. "There's the arrest authorization—there in the blue envelope. You got to get this miserable #%@*&%\$, Joey."

"Don't call me Joey," I said, studying the documents he gave me. "What's this address you have listed for him?"

Donk shrugged. "That's the address Kyle gave me. It's his mother's house. But he ain't there, I can guarantee you that."

I took the picture of Kyle from the packet. Ugly bastard, even his face had muscles. Donk continued his dialogue of hand-wringing despair as Swine and myself piled into my vintage Mustang.

Donk shouted at our departure: "Remember, you only got three days before the bond forfeiture to the state!"

"What's got him all excited?" Swine wanted to know.

I explained the arrangement I'd been forced to make with Donk to get the bail for his release. I went on to tell him what I knew about Kyle Breen. Then I asked him what happened with Mona Phillips.

"I didn't do it, Joe. You know I couldn't do nothin' like that."

"What happened, then?"

Swine was in the dark. He told me that Mona Phillips was a seller at Calder, a dispenser of pari-mutuel tickets. He said that he took her a cup of coffee now and then when she was on the job. But they weren't lovers, he insisted. He asked her out once. She refused, so he never tried again. Sometimes they rode the bus together. She had an apartment just down the street from his efficiency.

"So what was she doing in your apartment?" I broke in.

"I ain't sure. She knocked on the door, so I let her in. She said she ran out of cigarettes and wanted to know if I had any. Well, you know I don't smoke. Hell, *she* knew that. She . . . she acted like she was kinda coming on to me. She asked me to go down to the corner and get her a pack of cigarettes . . . said that while I was down there maybe I

should pick us up a six-pack of beer."

"So what did you do?"

"What the hell do you think? I took off down the street for the corner store."

"Hmmm. What about when you got back?" I prompted.

"I was gone maybe fifteen minutes tops. When I got back, I was gonna knock for her to let me in, but the door looked busted in. It was partway open, so I pushed it open all the way and walked in. Bang, the lights went out. Somebody conked me on the noggin."

"Then what?"

"Then nothin'. Old man Chainy comin' back from the liquor store stuck his sorry drunken face in my open door and called the cops."

The yellow crime-scene perimeter tape still stretched across the broken door to Swine's apartment. We tore it down and went inside. The dwelling was dark, *Racing Form*-strewn, and decorated in antique chipped enamel. A lone hundred watt bulb suspended from mid ceiling on a scraggly cord illuminated, but failed to overpower, the utter dinginess.

"This place gets worse every time I come in here," I commented. "Did you ever get the drains fixed?"

"Everything works fine," said Swine, stepping carefully over the chalk outline of Mona in the middle of the concrete floor. "You think it's okay to erase that?" he asked.

"I imagine it'll wear away in a day or two," I told him, an answer he accepted eagerly. On the floor near the chalk outline was a cereal box with cornflakes spilling out.

Half a dozen pari-mutuel tickets were strewn about on the counter-tops and floor. An unopened box of Rice-A-Roni lay conspicuously by the door along with a six-pack of beer. I pointed out these items to Swine and asked if he remembered their being there when he woke up.

He pointed at the six-pack by the door. "Yeah, that's the six-pack I bought. The cops took the cigarettes. I had them in my pocket. And I know the cornflakes was there. Every time the cops stepped in them there was a crunching noise."

"So, except for the six-pack, how do you explain the rest of the stuff?" I asked. "Who scattered the tickets all over? Who put the cornflakes on the floor and tossed the Rice-A-Roni over there?"

"Hell, I don't know. It wasn't me."

"Okay if it wasn't you and it wasn't the cops, it must have been Mona or the killer. Don't you figure?"

"Uh, yeah, that's right," Swine said. "But why would Mona want to dump my cornflakes on the floor?"

I pointed out to Swine that he was failing to grasp the essence of the picture presented here. Obviously somebody was looking for something. It appeared as if they stopped before they got into the search in earnest. Either they found what they were looking for or they were interrupted. Otherwise there would have been a lot more stuff dumped from the shelves and cupboards.

"Can you tell if anything is missing?" I asked him.

Swine did a quick perusal of the

tiny room. "I don't see nothin' missing," he said.

I picked up one of the mutuel tickets from the top of the small refrigerator. It was dated two weeks before. "What's these tickets?" I asked.

"Oh, I keep all my losing tickets in a shoebox for the year. Then when I hit the biggy I got some losers so's I don't have to pay the income tax. You was the one that told me to save 'em."

"It might have been a needless precaution," I told him. "I don't remember you ever hitting a payoff big enough to get near the IRS window. Where's the shoebox?"

Swine pointed to a small floor shelf in the corner. "I keep it right over . . . damn. It's gone."

Before I had time to absorb this new turn of events, a small mouse scooted in little spurts across the floor. We stood stock-still and watched it make its way to the pile of cornflakes and begin to nibble away.

"Don't move," said Swine. "That's Martha."

"Martha? How do you know it's a female?"

"She's got her babies behind the refrigerator," Swine explained.

"Jeez, are you nuts? How the hell can you live like this?" I asked.

"Like what?"

Now you understand why it was hard for me to believe that Swine could kill anything with malice. I told him that he was on me for the next few days until I could find Kyle and figure out what happened with Mona. I convinced him that if we were going to clear him it would

take both of us to unravel his predicament. Which was true. But mainly I wanted to make sure I could find him. I trusted him not to jump bail, but if things should turn sour—well, you never know.

I have my office in the back of the Sunbelt Realty Building. It's only one room with a community toilet down the hall, but it works for me. While Swine was calling Security at Calder from my office to explain why he hadn't shown up for work, I supplied Bonnie in the Sunbelt Realty office with Kyle Breen's Social Security number and the address from Donk's documentation. In a matter of a few minutes I handed her twelve dollars, and she handed me a credit report on Kyle Breen. It was standard procedure. Sometimes it paid off, sometimes not. I took the report with me into the office.

Swine was stretched out on my cot beneath my gigantic photograph of the matchless Seattle Slew edging away from Cormorant approaching the far turn in the 1977 Preakness Stakes.

"I told them I was gonna take a coupla days vacation," he said. "Where we gonna start at?"

"Don't know yet," I mumbled, studying Kyle's credit rating. The report was about what you would expect. Nobody was going to sell this guy a used car. There was one item that caught my eye: Kyle had an active credit card. And it wasn't yet maxed out. It was a beginning. I explained my plan to Swine.

"What kinda weirdo are you?" Swine asked. "We can't break into his mama's house."

"We're not going to break into her house," I reassured him. "Hopefully she'll just hand it over if we play our cards right."

On the way Swine issued relentless warnings about the cruelty of harassing old ladies, posing various scenarios: she could get excited and have a heart attack, or fall and break her hip, or call the cops. All this needless concern rushed from memory when Mrs. Breen opened the door. She was anything but frail. Old but tall and big-boned, she filled the doorway. "What do you punks want?" she asked.

Meeting Mrs. Breen could only add to the wonder of how nasty Kyle must be. But I forged onward.

I pointed to Swine. "This is Mr. Squeege. My name is Colbert. We are representatives of Visa, the credit card company." I waited for her reaction, but she simply stared at us in sinister silence. I struggled on. "There is a credit card for a Mr. Kyle Breen listed at this address. We are here to pick up the card for non-payment."

"Kyle's not here, neither is the card," she told us. "Anyway, I sent a payment in on his card two weeks ago—so hit the bricks."

I put my hand against the door she was about to slam in our face. "Well, if you have a statement from us that reflects the card as being current, I guess there could have been a mix-up at the main office. Have you got your last statement?"

She swore and thudded across the living room, leaving us in the open doorway.

"Jeez, ain't she a load," Swine commented in her absence.

She returned with the smirk of virtuous right on her side and thrust forth the vindicating document. "Here's the statement," she said. "See for your ownself. Then get the hell out. Never heard of such a thing . . . Visa got their own police. World's goin' to hell."

The statement was only eight days old. "We'll need to keep this," I said. "You know, to straighten things out back at the main office."

"Well, you can't have it," she shouted back. She made a grab for it but missed. She might have been big, but she was slow. Me and Swine were in the Mustang half-way down the street before she even got to the sidewalk.

Back at the office Swine sat on the cot while I studied Kyle's credit card statement. "When we gonna work on my case?" he asked. "I got a preliminary hearing in a few days."

"First things first," I said. "I had to find out if Kyle was still in Miami. According to his credit card statement he was still in town ten days ago. But since you bring it up, let me ask you a few questions."

"Shoot."

"Were you still knocked out when the drunk looked in the door and called the cops?"

"Yeah, one of the cops woke me up. Chainy was standin' in the doorway yellin' at the cops, tellin' them what a vicious bastard I was."

"You told the police what happened?"

"Yeah, I told 'em. I showed 'em the lump on my head. They booked me anyway."

"How did they identify Mona?"

"Whaddaya ya mean?"

"I mean, did they check in her purse for an I.D. or a driver's license, or what?"

"No, I told them who she was," said Swine. "Come to think of it, there wasn't any purse."

"Mona didn't carry a purse?" I asked in surprise.

Swine was thoughtful for a moment. "No, she had a purse. One of them bag things that hung on her wrist. But it wasn't there when the cops was diggin' through my stuff. At least, I don't remember seein' it."

"I'll check with Crook and see if we can persuade him to get some details from the D.A. Sounds to me like there are a lot of holes in their case. Cops usually take the path of least resistance. In this case you were it. As far as I can tell, the facts are as follows: Somebody struggled with and killed Mona. Somebody attempted to search your apartment. Not necessarily in that order. The killer took with him or her your box of losing pari-mutuel tickets and Mona's purse. He or she might or might not have found what they were looking for. My guess is, they didn't. If the killer had the item and knew it, only the item would have been taken . . . whatever the item is. There would have been no reason to take your tickets and Mona's purse, unless they thought the item was in the purse or the box. So, they were in a rush and not sure they had it. Now we need to determine what 'it' is. What have you got in your crappy apartment that somebody would kill for?"

"Nothin'. And you can believe that."

"If that's true, Mona must have had something on her that she hid in your apartment while you were off at the store . . . something somebody wanted pretty bad. Something that fit in her handbag."

I could just make the eleventh race at Calder. I ripped off a piece of notepad, scribbled a phone number, and handed the slip to Swine. "That's the number to my new mobile phone. I got something I want you to do."

"Get out," said Swine. "You got a cell phone! When did this happen?"

"I'm trying to move into the twenty-first century here," I told him.

Kyle's credit report showed that he had used the card recently four different times at the same restaurant, The Boathouse in north Miami. I explained this to Swine. I handed him the photograph of Kyle that Donk had given me. "Stake out the restaurant. If you spot Kyle, follow him when he leaves and give me a call on the mobile phone." I handed him two twenties. "Here's busfare and some lounging money."

"What are you gonna do?" he wanted to know.

"I'm going to the track," I told him. "Maybe I can get filled in on Mona—talk to the other sellers, see if I can pick something up. Where was her window?"

Swine instructed me as to where in the large Calder racing plant Mona did business.

It was twelve minutes to post for

the eleventh race when I went through the grandstand turnstile. One of the benefits of a well-run and beneficent racetrack like Calder, they let you in free after the seventh race.

The crowd had thinned; most were probably busted out by now. I grabbed a discarded program from a trash barrel and did a quick survey of the eleventh race: seven furlongs on the main track for two-year-old fillies. It was a long race for young, inexperienced contenders. A smart handicapper should be looking for a horse that had at least been the distance or gone longer.

After digging a little deeper in the trash barrel I managed to salvage a *Form* and ripped out the page with Calder's eleventh race. It was in bad shape, damp with what I hoped was coffee, but still legible. Number three, Dainty Lady, had gone a mile and a sixteenth last out—a terrible race. But there were no worldbeaters entered, and she was the only entry that had gone more than six furlongs. The trainer was good with two-year-olds. The jockey was competent and usually sober. Dainty Lady was nine to one. It was a chance to get back the forty that I'd given Swine.

I went to the third window in from the University Drive side, the north entrance on the ground floor of the grandstand—Mona's old window. There was a Cuban woman there now, with orange hair.

"Ten and ten on the three horse," I said to her. She punched up the tickets and grabbed the twenty I offered. "Did you know Mona, the gal who used to work this window?"

She told me in broken English that she had worked upstairs; this was her first time in the grandstand. I moved over to the guy working window two from the north entrance. "How about you? Did you know Mona?"

He was Cuban also, but his English carried only the faintest Latino trace. I explained that I was a private investigator looking into her death. "Yes, I knew Mona," he told me. He seemed cooperative. I asked him what kind of person she was.

"She was okay," he responded. I waited several seconds for the expanded version.

"What does that mean?" I asked, in an effort to draw him out. "She was a good seller? She gave to the Salvation Army? She didn't pick her nose? What?"

One window to my right and four windows to my left were open with no customers. So you can imagine my consternation when an old nimbler with a cane poked me in the back.

"Hurry up," he said. "I want to make a bet."

"Go over there," I instructed him, pointing to the woman with the orange hair.

"I ain't goin' over there," the old man shouted hysterically in my face with beer-stained breath. "This is my lucky window. Bet, or get the hell out of the way."

This I well understood and let him pass. He bet twenty to win on the six. The horses were out of the gate as he turned from the window. We both stood stock-still watching a nearby monitor as his six horse

broke on top and drew off to a two length lead. Dainty Lady, my three horse, was last into the first turn.

"Come on, Cholee!" he shouted. "Open up with that six horse, Benny, open up!"

Cholee had already gained a five length lead at the far turn. My three horse had only beaten one horse.

"Come on, three," I muttered with faint heart.

The old man cackled gleefully as Cholee entered the stretch turn still holding four lengths in front. "You got it now, Cholee! Pour it on, Cholee!"

After the stretch turn Cholee began to take baby steps. Her lead diminished rapidly. Only one horse was now moving with any energy. And that horse was . . .

"Come on, Dainty Lady!" I screamed as the filly came six wide into the stretch and commenced to gobble up contenders.

"Keep going, Cholee," the old punter beseeched in a whisper of desperation as the front runner strained unsuccessfully to maintain her slim lead.

As Dainty Lady sailed past the old man's selection, I screamed: "Drop dead, Cholee!" The old bastard turned rapidly and rapped me on the shin with his cane. I grabbed my leg to stem the pain and missed the finish.

"Damned communist," he spit at me before tottering away.

I presented my winning ticket to the old man's lucky seller, the one I had been quizzing before I got into it with the old maniac. Dainty Lady paid \$20.20 and \$6.40. My tick-

et was worth a hundred and thirty-three bucks. As he counted the cash out, I asked again about Mona.

"I don't want to say anything bad about the dead," he commented.

"Why not?" I asked. "The odds are pretty good the dead can't hear you."

My leg hurt like hell. I could feel a large knob beginning to rise on my shinbone. Raul was the name of the lucky seller of the old lunatic who'd rapped me with the cane.

It took awhile to drag the information from him. Mona had only been on the job a little over a month. She kept to herself, Raul told me. Didn't have any close friends except maybe Swine, who was obviously sweet on her and brought her coffee down from the second level every day. He then alluded to the fact that she was probably a thief, explaining that the track had warned her numerous times because of shortages in her cash drawer. When I asked if anything unusual had happened in the last day or so, I hit pay dirt. He told me about the superfecta ticket.

Raul had forgotten which race, but the superfecta had paid over thirty-six thousand and there was only one ticket sold. "The guy got in Mona's face," Raul told me. "He was screaming at her that he'd hit the superfecta. Claimed that he forgot to take his ticket and she still had it."

"How could the guy be so sure that he hit the super?" I asked.

"He was screaming at her: *I always bet my address, one, three, two six—that's my house number, one,*

three, two, six Alexander. Then he called her names and threatened her. When he tried to climb over the counter, Allen and Brody from Security dragged the guy away still screaming.”

Hobbling to the parking lot on my swelling leg, I put a call in to Ordway Crook. I needed to confirm my suspicions. It appeared obvious that the guy at 1326 Alexander had an excellent motive to stalk Mona; add to that the missing items from Swine’s apartment—a shoebox full of spent pari-mutuel tickets and Mona’s purse—and it hung together. It was even money that Mr. 1326 Alexander broke in, hammered on Mona, and was searching Swine’s hovel for his superfecta ticket when Swine showed up with beer from the corner store.

Ordway Crook was still the attorney of record in Swine’s case. He returned my call to give me the information gleaned from the D.A.’s office. And also to remind me that he was now on the clock at two hundred fifty dollars an hour. If Swine didn’t pay, it was going on my tab. He reported that there was no information from the police that Mona Phillips’ apartment had been searched when they did their investigation. And he confirmed that Mona’s purse had not been found at the scene.

Back at the office, I checked the charts in the *Racing Form*. It was the sixth race two days back at Calder. There was only one ticket for \$36,384.60.

I called the head of Security at Calder, Jimmy Cox, a personal friend. I explained to him my sus-

picious concerning the death of Mona. It only took him a few minutes to find out that the ticket had not been cashed.

I’d just hung up when the cell phone in my pocket rang.

“Joe, I found Kyle,” Swine said excitedly. “I watched him go into the restaurant and followed him when he came out. He’s got a room a block from the restaurant in the Goodman Hotel.” Swine gave me the address. I told him to stay there until I picked him up.

It took a half hour to get to the Goodman and find Swine. He slid into the Mustang and had to slam the door a couple of times before it closed properly.

“I even got his room number,” Swine reported. He watched me do a U-turn and head back south. “Where the hell you goin’? Ain’t we goin’ in to get him?”

“Something we need to check first,” I said. When we got back to Swine’s neighborhood in Hialeah, I had him direct me to Mona’s apartment. The door had been jimmied. It took only a cursory look through a window. The place had been thoroughly tossed. Even the couch and chairs had been cut open and the stuffing strewn about. It meant only one thing: Mr. 1326 Alexander hadn’t found the ticket at Swine’s dump. He must have figured that Mona’s place was too hot last night for anything but a quick search. He just waited until the cops cleared out.

I explained my discoveries concerning the superfecta ticket to Swine. “We need to check out your place again,” I added. “Also, we need

to pick up Leroy." Leroy was Swine's name for his handstitched blackjack. A nifty tool in hand-to-hand tussle situations.

I followed Swine into his pigsty. "How come you're limping?" he asked.

I told him about the old man with the cane. I pulled my pants leg up to take a look. The spot on my leg was angry and swollen. It hurt like hell. "I got somethin' that'll help," Swine told me. "Just a minute." He went to a makeshift medicine cabinet that resided in a plastic container he pulled from beneath his bed.

"What is it?" I asked him.

He pulled out a can and popped the lid. "Poultice," he said, "I got it from Oslo Corbett. He says it'll draw out the infection and reduce the pain and swelling. I'll just smear some on the wound and wrap it with this vet wrap he gave me."

"That's for a horse," I pointed out.

"It'll work on you the same," said Swine. He tore the retaining band from the vet roll bandage and began to unravel it. The ticket that had been inserted in the center hole of the roll fluttered to the floor.

It was a superfecta ticket. It was *the* superfecta ticket. The date and the numbers were right. I was holding thirty-six thousand plus in my hand.

I allowed him to put the stuff on my leg. I didn't figure it could hurt any worse.

"Maybe you ought to let me hold the ticket," Swine suggested, clamping the bandage off.

"Never mind that. Get Leroy."

Kyle worried me. With the bum leg it was going to be doubly difficult to take him... maybe not even possible. As for Swine's situation, we had gleaned some circumstantial evidence. But outside of a motive for 1326 Alexander, there was nothing to tie the guy to Mona after the track incident. We needed more.

To confront Kyle head-on would be very dangerous. I needed a plan. We were on our way to the Goodman Hotel to apprehend him when an idea began to bubble around in my brain. I explained everything to Swine. I asked him if he could go inside and see if Kyle was still there without tipping him off.

"Not a problem," he said. "The desk clerk is Eddie Sloan. I already talked to him. I told him I'd let him into any vacant owner's box in the clubhouse free for the rest of the year."

"You mean Odds Board Eddie?" I asked.

"Yeah."

Odds Board Eddie, a fixture at the track for the late races, was a bettor with a particular angle. He added the weight the horse carried to the final odds on the toteboard, and whichever contestant had the lowest number was his selection—sort of an oddball, and aptly named.

Once Swine reported back that Kyle was still in his room, I told him to plant himself in the lobby and keep an eye out. I headed the Mustang farther north and about ten blocks east to where the map on the wall at Sunbelt Realty indicated I would find Alexander Street.

It was there all right: one, three,

two, six in black letters stuck on the mailbox. And the little red arm was up. I checked the return address on the mail inside. Mr. 1326 Alexander had a name: Jorge Cumal.

I put the mail back in the mailbox and limped up to the porch. I punched the doorbell and stood back. The door opened almost at once. A small, pudgy woman with two different-colored eyes and no teeth gave me the once-over. She rattled something at me in Spanish.

I bedazzled her with the tried and true: "*No hablo español.*" She backed out of the doorway and waved to someone inside.

Jorge was big, maybe an inch taller than Kyle's mama, and probably a lot quicker. His mustache was meager; his English was good and direct. "What do you want?" he asked.

"You're looking for your superfecta ticket," I said. "I can tell you where to find it for twenty percent."

He closed the door behind him and joined me on the small porch. "What you talkin', man?"

I didn't want to make it too complicated because I didn't know how smart he was. One thing for sure, I had his attention. I told him that Frankie Swinehart, Mona's boyfriend, had told me in confidence that Mona had given him the ticket. I told Jorge that Swine, short for Swinehart, still had the ticket. And I knew where he was staying. I told him we had to move fast before Swine cashed in when the track opened tomorrow.

Jorge didn't even pretend that

he didn't know what I was talking about. "Why hasn't he cashed it before now?" he wanted to know.

"He's been in jail. Don't you read the papers? He just got out late today."

He nodded. "Oh yeah . . . I read about it. I—I ah—I think I know where he lives. What I need you for?"

"He's moved," I said quickly. "He's in a hotel in north Miami." Jorge was a bit sharper than I'd first surmised. But he was greedy. I knew that he had already made up his mind to screw me out of my percentage should he get the ticket back. Given that, and driven by desperation and greed, he was ready to buy into anything. I was counting on it. But he kept surprising me.

"Why didn't you just get the ticket yourself?" he asked, catching me by surprise.

"Bum leg," I said feebly, pointing to my leg. "Swine's a pretty good-sized guy. It'll probably take both of us. Besides, you got a rotten deal. It's your ticket."

"A big guy?" Jorge muttered, obviously puzzled. I remembered too late that he had conked Swine on the head. Evidently his impression was that Swine wasn't a big guy. Of course he was right. Swine wouldn't go more than a hundred sixty pounds wearing a scuba belt. But Jorge dismissed it, possibly considering me a weenie.

"Let's go," he said. "I'll follow you in my car."

Jorge drove a vintage Cadillac DeVille with its common trademark: that is, the eroded-away

space between the rear fenders and the large, vertical taillights. He tailgated my Mustang with unrelenting enthusiasm, allowing no chance that I might lose him in traffic. When we entered the Goodman Hotel in lockstep, I spotted Swine behind a newspaper in the corner of the tiny lobby. Jorge kept his eyes on me as we proceeded to the stairs. Odds Board Eddie behind the registration desk ignored us.

"Second floor," I told Jorge.

Swine had given me Kyle's room number. As we started up the stairs, I was getting a little apprehensive. For this to halfway work, I had to rely heavily on Jorge's demonstrated greed and Kyle's intrinsic savageness. I was praying that neither would let me down. It had been a long time since my Golden Glove days. Just to play it safe, I decide to send Jorge inside while I waited in the doorway.

I stood alongside the door. "Two oh five, this is it," I told Jorge. "You think we should knock or what?"

"The hell with that," said Jorge. "We take this little [*Spanish expletive*] by surprise." With that he rammed his huge frame into the door. The door flew open with negligible resistance. The momentum of his charge carried Jorge partway into the room, where he came to an abrupt stop as the six foot five inch, two hundred seventy pound Kyle, clad only in his underwear, rose to his full imposing height from the bed.

Jorge said nothing for a brief second, he simply stared. But if faces could speak without a mouth, his face would have shouted *whoa!*

Kyle stood unmoving, using the interlude to marshal and focus his nastiness.

Jorge realized that something seemed to be wrong. But he made two fatal errors. The first was not running out the open door. The second was: "You're Swine?" he said to Kyle.

When Kyle lunged, he was much, much quicker than his mom. He grabbed Jorge's shirt with a large fist and lifted him off the floor. He cocked his other fist back as Jorge began to jabber profusely.

"Wait! Wait!," shouted Jorge. "I thought you were Swine . . ."

The blow knocked Jorge across the room. I pulled my head from the doorway to take a position against the wall in the hallway. From inside I could hear Kyle shouting.

"You little piss ant. You break into my room and call me a swine. I know you're workin' for that #@*&^%\$ bail bond guy."

I chanced a look around the door jamb. Kyle was holding Jorge upright with one hand. His other hand was full of Jorge's black hair. He was gleefully hammering Jorge's head against the wall:

Thud . . . thud . . . thud.

Kyle's back was to the door. While he was occupied, I drew Leroy out and took five or six big steps into the room. I smacked him a good one on the back of the head. He let Jorge collapse, unconscious, to the floor and turned slowly to face me. Then his eyes fluttered, and he sort of melted into a pile.

Of course I'd had plan B if Kyle hadn't ignited on his own. I had

thought I might get things under way by announcing to Kyle that Jorge was working for Nolan Bail Bonds. Just as well I hadn't had to use it. It made the rest of the plan possible.

I took the superfecta ticket from my shirt pocket and put it under the corner of the lamp on the table by Kyle's bed. I got a glass of water from the bathroom and doused Jorge. His nose looked broken, and he had a front tooth missing.

"You all right?" I asked as he came around.

"My face," he moaned. He spit the missing tooth onto the carpet.

I handed him a wet hand towel to press on his nose.

He nodded toward Kyle, who lay unmoving nearby. "What happened to him?"

"I took care of him while he was busy with you."

"I don't think that's Swine," said Jorge. "I mean, that's not the guy I remember . . ."

"I don't know who you're thinking about. That's the only Swine I know. And look there on the table—isn't that the ticket?"

With the mention of the ticket, the glaze evaporated from Jorge's eyes. They fixed on the bedside table. He attempted to rise, fell back, then scrambled forward on hands and knees to grasp the ticket. He studied it carefully, smiled wickedly, and put it in his shirt pocket. About then Kyle groaned.

"We better get the hell out of here before he comes around," I said. "You cash the ticket when the track opens tomorrow. I'll be at your house at noon for my cut."

Jorge got awkwardly to his feet. "Yeah, right," he said. He shrewdly chose not to add the word stupid to his confirmation. He beat me through the doorway by two steps.

We raced down the stairs to the lobby. Jorge continued out the lobby door. I went into the street and watched him wheel away in the Caddy, then stepped back inside and motioned to Swine.

Kyle was still out when we got back to his room. Swine took a piece of clothesline from his pants pocket and bound his ankles tightly together. I used plastic handcuffs to fasten his hands behind his back. Because of my bad leg, it cost an extra thirty dollars to have Odds Board Eddie help us carry him down to the Mustang. With the top down we laid him on the trunk and rolled him into the back seat.

On the way to the main lockup downtown, I used the cell phone to call Donk Nolan and tell him that I had Kyle. I told him to meet me downtown. He gushed euphoria and praised my abilities. None of which could mask the fact that he was still an offensive little jerk.

Back in the office Swine plopped on my cot in protest. "You got to be an idiot boob for givin' the superfecta ticket back to that killer—thirty-six grand—what the hell you thinkin' of?"

"Look, try to get it straight. I got a call in to Jimmy Cox. When the track opens tomorrow and Jorge tries to cash that ticket—which he will surely do—track security is going to grab him and hold him for the police. Ordway Crook has talked to the D.A. and explained

that Jorge killed Mona to get the ticket back. Raul the seller and track security will testify about the confrontation over the ticket at the track. When they catch Jorge trying to cash it, it'll be all tied up for them—open and shut.”

Swine shook his head. “Yeah, but thirty-six thousand, Jeez.”

“The price of freedom is high,” I reminded him.

“What about Jorge? How much time you think he'll get?”

I opened the *Form* to the first race at Calder. “Hmm, that's a tough one,” I muttered, my attention fixed on one of my key horses that had drawn the rail in the first race. “Depends on the jury. Killing someone who stole your superfecta ticket might be considered justifiable homicide in some circles.”

SOLUTION TO THE APRIL “UNSOLVED”:

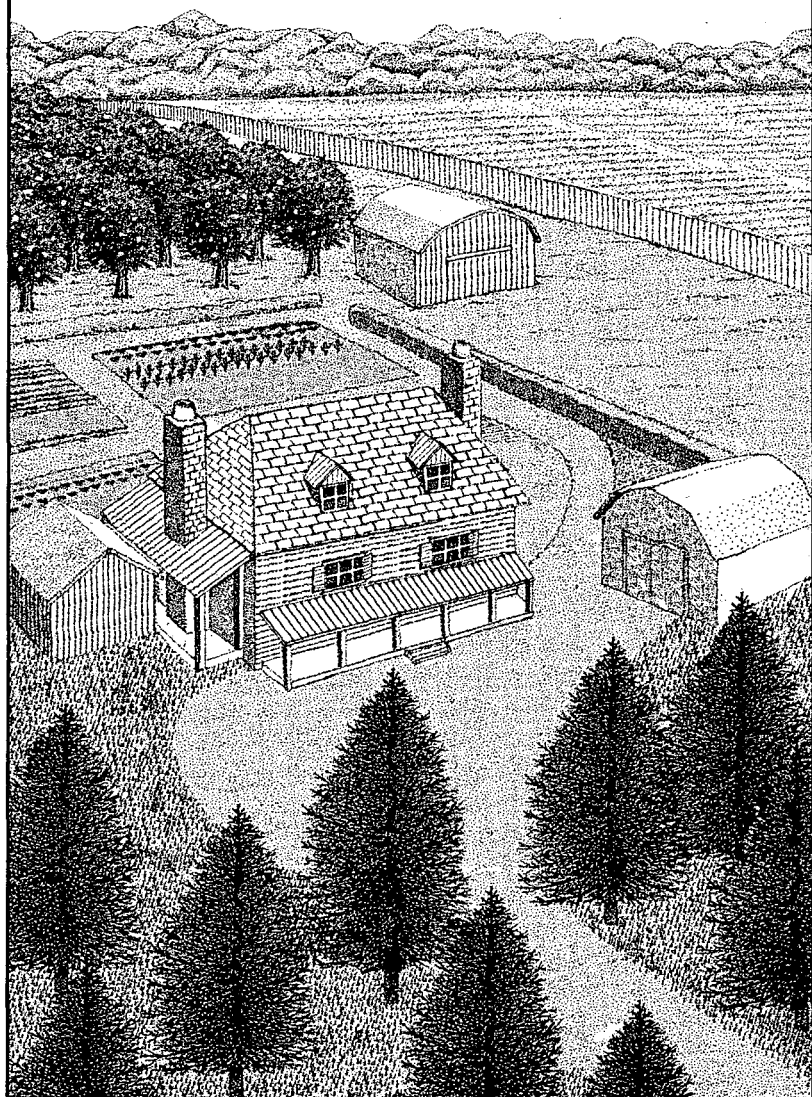
The spy was Private Edwin Parker.

DEPART	SOLDIER	FROM	RETURN
1	Pvt. Daniel Quinn	Long	High
2	Sgt. Andrew Nash	Gott	Keystone
3	Pvt. Edwin Parker	Keystone	Indigo
4	Cpl. Brian Moore	High	Gott
5	Sgt. Frank Rankin	Indigo	Jay
6	Cpl. Carl O'Toole	Jay	Long

FICTION

ANNA CATHERINE

Esther J. Holt



Molly knelt in the grass edging the small ring of pansies circling the mailbox post at the corner of the lawn. She stopped loosening the dirt with the trowel and sat back on her heels, laughing to herself.

The galvanized box on the sturdy wooden post might have been an icon to which she prayed: "Bring good mail. Bring me interesting mail." A supplicant in jeans and loose shirt asking for what seldom happens these days. Most of the people who'd written long, interesting letters were gone or unable to write for themselves.

"Well, why not? I'm sixty-four and, I'm told by my own grandchildren, not so old for my age," she grumbled and got to her feet. She brushed at the stains on her knees.

Anna Catherine was one of the few elderly left in the extensive Demaris clan, and she still wrote a clear hand. Surprising because when she owned her own chain of furniture stores she'd typed, or a secretary did, all her letters with just her salutation and signature in longhand.

All the Demarises claimed relationship to Anna Catherine. First, because she was a unique character given to wearing calf-length flared skirts and loose man-tailored shirts no matter what the fashion mavens dictated. Her hair Molly had never seen out of its golden crown of braids.

"Oh, how I wish for the times . . ." Molly stopped wishing, wondering if the mailman in the miniature postal truck had seen her talking to the mailbox. She'd been about to wish for the times when she still hoped she could be as tall and slender as Anna Catherine Demaris Kingsley.

"Mrs. Thornby." The postal truck glided to a stop in front of the box. The new mailman was offering her her mail. He smiled, "Direct to you."

"Now, if I could get you to sort the sense from the nonsense." She smiled back and saw, without surprise, the familiar cream-colored envelope on top. Instead of the reversed flag stamp, there should have been something with a crest. She held it up. "One of the few people who still write a good letter."

"Hope they're not writing from a ship." The mailman settled in his seat, ready to drive on. He saw her puzzlement. "Before ships had radios, they sent distress signals to passing ships by hanging their country's flag upside-down. Or," He shrugged. "it can mean someone loves you."

"Yes, someone loves me," she murmured, watching the truck moving along the berm to the Evanses' box.

She waited till after she'd washed her hands and had a cup of coffee in front of her to slit open the letter and take out the folded pages.

"I've decided to go see Anna Catherine—and Jake and Nora," Molly announced when she set Anson's piece of lemon pie at his place. She returned to her own chair across the corner of the dining room table and reached for his cup to refill it from the china pot.

"I trust you're going to warn them you're coming. You know how reclusive they've become. I'm surprised Anna Catherine has stayed out there for so long. What is it now? Four years or more?" He cut the tip off his pie and savored the tang. "Delicious."

"Thank you. It must be at least four Demaris reunions ago when she surprised us all by coming with them. And they announced she'd been staying for some time. They've missed two reunions since then. She never said why in her letters."

"Big noisy crowds aren't Jake and Nora's style. When will you go, then?" He was used to her going off to visit one or the other of their four children.

"When I'm satisfied that Mrs. Loring can come in to fix your meals. Otherwise, you'll be stopping at the fast-food strip on your way home." She managed a light laugh.

"I will miss you." Getting up to carry his dishes to the kitchen, Anson planted a resounding kiss on her head.

Long after he'd gone to read his evening paper, Molly sat at the table. The mailman's casual remark had cast a new light on the contents of Anna Catherine's letters.

She'd always written in great detail about her surroundings, whether in her Chicago business headquarters or in Paris with Uncle Stuart. Why wouldn't she describe Orchard Hill Farm as well? It was she who'd given it the name. Before that, the family had called it Jake's place, or the Olander farm.

Molly went to her desk in the kitchen to reread the day's letter. It seemed Jake was working on a commissioned mobile that made no sense to anyone who saw it. Nora was canning or freezing midsummer vegetables. She made pocket money selling the excess at the farmers' market in town. Her fourteen-day-pickles were into their seventh day in the sauerkraut shed just off the back porch. Could Anna Catherine have missed such simplicity in her earlier life, Molly wondered.

The farm was a far cry from the places Anna Catherine had seen with her naval officer husband. It was so remote, Molly would have to drive the Interstate, then a two-lane to a one-lane to a dirt drive up a hill. It ended at what she remembered as a barn-red farmhouse with wrap-around porch on two sides and a two-car garage. The old barn, now Jake's studio, sat on a slightly lower elevation toward the next farm.

If Anna Catherine had gone straight there after Uncle Stuart's death ... it had to be at least ten years after that. The years between she'd gone on traveling, never staying put in one place for very long.

Two days later Anson stayed home from the business machine store to see Molly on her way. She had her bank card and her cell phone in her purse and a map next to her on the front seat. Who knew what changes the highway engineers had wrought? Too, the times her family had gone there were few and far between.

The sun was bright in a surprisingly blue sky as Molly drove between man-made banks covered with crown vetch. She wondered what sort of life went on behind those banks. And what she'd find at the Olander place, Orchard Hill Farm.

What if she found nothing out of the ordinary there? She could hardly blame her sudden appearance on upside-down flags. Of course there was always honesty. She wanted to see Anna Catherine. The one person who consistently called her Moira.

Just off the Interstate Molly pulled in at a service station, where the attendant filled the tank while she used the restroom. Then he confirmed that she was on the right road.

The road to Starkville appeared to be dangerously crowded by trees and brush on both sides. She remembered an old movie or a short story she'd read where the road vanished after a car had driven over it. What had the village of Starkville become? Was everything now smothered by thorny brambles?

Suddenly the greenery was gone from the sides of the road, and the small town, open and bright, hugged its edge. There were no marked parking spaces between the road and the sidewalk. Molly eased the car to the curb in line with a parking meter in front of a sprawling two-story building. Apparently the post office was in Heidle's Variety and General Store. She got out and put a nickel in the meter.

She had the feeling she'd been rushing headlong for two days or more. Perhaps she could steal a few moments here, catch up with herself. No one was expecting her, after all.

In the cool store she paused at a counter with a sign, OLD GLASSWARE. Not a collector, she picked out two pieces she liked, a small golden amber vase with a fluted edge and a cut-glass candy jar. She carried both to the woman at the antique cash register and got out a twenty dollar bill.

"Am I on the right road for the Olander place?"

"Olander?" The grayhaired woman's eyes went cold. "Why would you want to go there? Are you another reporter? You should have been here two days ago. The story's old news by now because there was no story." The clerk held onto the glassware as if she'd decided not to sell it after all.

Story? Molly opened her mouth, closed it, then tried again.

"Jake is my cousin, second or third. His mother and my father were Demarises. It's been years since I last came here, so I'm lost. And why would you be expecting reporters?"

"I guess they did call someone, then. Nora couldn't make up her mind. If you *are* family, you'd know how she can be. A death of someone not even her kin can almost lay her out."

"Yes." Death? Whose death? Molly didn't dare ask or the woman would decide she had to be a reporter after all and send her running.

"Am I on the right road, then? I need to get there as quickly as possible."

"Oh yes, of course." The woman wrapped Molly's purchases in newspaper, then bagged them. "There you are, ma'am. Will you tell Nora I'd be there if I could? I'll be in touch. Bertha Alley. Now, you go on out this road. The Olander place is on the right Just past the Miklos Dairy." Bertha Alley was turning away to wait on another customer.

Molly wasn't conscious of walking out of the store until she bumped into her front fender. She made her way around to the driver's seat seconds before her knees folded under her. She gripped the steering wheel and shivered till the car seemed to rock with her. Her throat tightened on a scream, or harsh sobs. Whatever, she fought to contain them.

She needed reality, her own life back there along the miles. Digging in her purse, she found the cell phone and dialed Anson's office number. When Mrs. Taylor told her he was working with a new clerk, Molly asked her just to tell him she'd arrived safely and would call him later.

Until that moment, she hadn't thought about how little she knew. How Anna Catherine had died, or when. Or why Nora or Jake hadn't called anyone. She prayed Anna Catherine had gone in her sleep without pain or fear. But something that simple wouldn't have brought reporters so far out, would it? Could they think the widow of Admiral Kingsley still commanded that much public interest?

"I need to know. I need to know now." Feeling stronger, Molly backed out of the parking space and headed into the countryside. She didn't see another vehicle for the entire five miles along the narrow road. Miklos Dairy was a big farm showplace with no need for the large sign along the road announcing it.

The Olander lane went up between two thin rows of spruce trees. Molly parked under a gnarled maple tree and got out to stand in the heavy stillness. Even the birds' chirping sounded like questions. Should they sing or not? She closed the car door so gently it barely clicked. Still, it sounded like a pistol shot.

The front door of the barn-red house was closed, possibly against the increasing heat. Molly walked past the weathered garage to a gravel path that curved around to the back of the house. A vegetable garden of gardening-magazine perfection took up most of the back yard. Gravel paths crisscrossed it into four sections. Everything, including the sauerkraut shed next to the porch, was just as Anna Catherine had written.

Beyond the garden the orchard was laid out in perfect rows. Had Nora set the trees so neatly? At any family gathering there's always one who questions everyone, "What do you think we should do now?" That was Nora.

Off to the right, on a slight downward slope, stood the old barn. Yellow streamers fluttered from the big doors. The uncut grass was trampled flat. Beyond the barn a white board fence separated Jake's fallow land

from the Miklos fields. Molly inhaled the breeze scented with freshly cut hay.

"Molly!" A screen door slammed, and Nora had her in a stranglehold. Or Molly assumed it was Nora. They were closer in height than either of them was with Anna Catherine. Besides, she was . . . The braid Molly felt when she hugged Nora back clashed with every other thing about the woman. She'd always looked almost mannish with short, shaggy hair. "How did you know to come? Was it on the news 'way out there? Oh, I've been needing family. Yes, I have."

"Nora, please!" Enough was too much. Molly managed to loosen Nora's hold if not escape it entirely. "Someone in town told me there'd been a death? How did she . . ."

"Moir! Oh, my darling child. I knew you'd be the one to come to us."

If they hadn't held her upright in twin embraces, Molly would have melted right down to the ground. As it was, the world disappeared in a white haze. The combined rushing of voices slowly brought her back. She began to realize the three of them were as interwoven as one of Jake's more complicated pieces. She stiffened herself to work her way out backward. Even then there was no escape.

Both Nora and Anna Catherine were leaning forward, talking into Molly's face. Nora's fingers kept plucking Molly's shoulder. Now and then one of them came out with a coherent sentence or two. Enough for her to know.

Jake was dead! An accident in the barn. Two days ago.

He'd been up on a high beam checking his block and tackle before he moved a newly delivered slab of stone. Sometimes he let a piece lie around for weeks until he knew what he wanted to do with it. This time he'd known from the first.

He'd climb the ladder along the barn wall to make sure the block and tackle were in the right place. Then he'd call the Miklos boy to bring his tractor, at his convenience, to make the move. Being a methodical man, Jake never minded the wait. He always had other things he could do.

It was after he'd called the Miklos boy that he must have gone back up on the beam. Somehow his foot had tangled in the heavy ropes. His weight had pulled him down and the heavy pulley up. It struck him squarely on the side of his head.

When Gil Miklos called to say he'd be there within the hour, Nora went down to tell Jake. She'd gone screaming across the fence and over the fields to the Mikloses' main barn. By the time someone came over, Anna Catherine was rushing around, frantic when she'd heard Nora's screams and couldn't find her.

"I think we're all in need of sustenance."

As Anna Catherine turned with a swirl of dark skirt, Molly noticed her hair. The once golden braid, now entirely silver, hung down the back of her loose percale shirt.

"We can sit here." Nora steered Molly to a table made from a cable spool turned on its side. Around it was a collection of old kitchen chairs painted antique blue.

"Shouldn't we go help her? Or something?" Even while she said it, Molly was sinking gratefully into one of the chairs. "Why is she still here, Nora? It's gone beyond a visit, hasn't it?"

"When her people checked, this was one of the few places the reporters wouldn't be likely to look."

When Nora turned her head to look into the distance, Molly felt the world sliding in the opposite direction. But why shouldn't Nora wear a braid? Didn't she herself change hair styles now and then? But never to copy someone else just to impress them. A feeling of being an intruder washed over Molly.

"Molly! Molly!" Nora's breath hit her in the face. "Are you going to faint on me?"

"No, I . . . I noticed yellow streamers on the barn. Did the police actually seal it? Nora, you haven't finished telling me everything. Why would the police investigate a simple accident?"

"It's procedure." Nora shrugged. "The coroner had to be called, too. Oh, don't look like that. He comes when there are farm accidents. Anyhow, there'll be an inquest before they release Jake back to us, to the undertaker. Can you stay that long?"

As badly as she needed to run to her car and retreat down the hill, Molly nodded. Nora hadn't answered her question about Anna Catherine's settling in there. It wasn't the time to repeat it, either.

"Anna Catherine's the only one to ever encourage my piano playing. Everyone else thought I had stubby fingers." Molly studied her short hands.

"She's like that. Finds out what a person wants, then puffs them up so . . . She was just the opposite with Jake. It got to be a . . ." Nora's attention was wandering again.

"When I heard that someone had died, I naturally thought it was . . . And then she was here with us and . . ."

"And Jake's not. With us. Who knows how many beautiful pieces of art went with him?" Nora's suddenly piercing gaze was turned on Molly. "*Has she ever really done anything for the world population? Offered them anything?*"

"Let's not weigh one against the other, please." The mailman's remarks about ships in distress came back to her. "Do you ever see the letters she writes to people?"

"She's stopped writing to everyone but you. And no, I don't see her personal and private letters. All I know is, she won't use any stamps but the ones with flags. I offered her some of my favorites with flowers." Nora's voice went cold. "They'd look better on that fancy stationery, I know that."

Anna Catherine came gliding down the steps carrying a well-filled tray.

Molly welcomed the hot tea but not the homemade bread almost forced on her. Nibbling at the cucumber sandwich, she realized her light-headedness was easing. She hadn't known how hungry she was. Or how weary.

Nora drank her tea and talked about a private graveside service for Jake. Anna Catherine took it all in and offered nothing. Both women seemed strangely content. Molly wondered about that. Very seldom had she ever seen two people react to shock in exactly the same way. Even two days later, there shouldn't be such an air of contentment.

"I'm going to my room now," Anna Catherine was drifting off, forgetting how desperately glad she'd been to have Molly there.

Molly wished Nora would suggest a rest for all them, but she stayed where she was. Then, "Let's walk." Nora was up and would have grabbed Molly's hand. She evaded the grasp. "Back along here."

"Back here" was a path through the orchard to the top of a slope leading down to a creek. There were rustic wood armchairs and a table, perfect for summer evening dining. They sat facing each other across the table.

"Nora," Molly said in her firmest voice, "why is Anna Catherine still here? As pleasant as the place is, it's not her sort. How does she manage without her servants?"

As founder and principal owner of a chain of furniture stores, Anna Catherine had been able to afford household help long before she married her naval officer.

"We did have a little problem about that at first. She had to be made to understand she was not attending a long houseparty. If she didn't want to get up early with us, she'd have to make her own breakfast and do small chores like making her bed. You know, she didn't start out any better than the rest of us. She'd done it all before."

"It still doesn't explain four long years. She could live in luxury anywhere in the world."

"You don't pay much attention to news from Washington, do you?" Nora shook her head in wonder at Molly's ignorance.

"I try not to. Don't we have enough to do dealing with our own sorrows? And we could never make any changes in those people out there. They're too self-oriented."

"Huh." Whatever that meant, Nora leaned forward with her forearms on the table. "You do know Uncle Stuart's history, I hope. With his family background, their money, he carried a lot of weight in certain circles. Too much for his enemies to work against him while he was alive. After he died, they started trying to connect him with all sorts of shady deals."

"So?" Molly wasn't about to offer Anson's opinion of Uncle Stuart

Kingsley. How in all the group photos centering around the president, Stuart Kingsley's face was just far enough into shot. When it was expedient for him to do so, he could step out, or in closer to stand shoulder to shoulder with the Man.

"Congressional investigations and such. Things that can send reporters scurrying around like ferrets. Anna Catherine had her people check out the Demaris clan to see which of us would best serve her purpose, and here she is. She must have thought of you first. You're such a toady, but you're also a social animal, too," Nora said slyly. "You lost out."

"Nora Olander, you should be slapped. And, if I treat people with extra kindness, you can't call it . . . whatever you called it," Molly said furiously.

"Hush! Voices carry out here. We have to act like family, especially now. I'm sorry." Nora ducked away, but not before Molly saw she wasn't at all sorry. "It's been harder and harder living with her. And now she'll never leave. Why should she?" Nora's weight on the table almost tipped it. Standing straight, she hurried to level it again.

Molly sat unmoving as she watched the new widow wandering off at an angle away from the Miklos farm. The braid bounced in time to her light step.

"Don't leave before the funeral." Nora had stopped and stood looking beyond Molly as though speaking to someone behind her. "Someone in the family should be there."

Before Molly reminded her that with a few phone calls half the clan could be there, Nora had drifted off again. Molly settled back to let her heart slow to its normal beat.

Denied the peace she should have felt there, she walked back to the house. At the spool table, she gathered the tea things and carried the tray into the house.

There was a note propped against a napkin holder in the center of the round table. She read it. Two of the neighbors had stopped by. There were casseroles in the refrigerator. Friends were welcome any time, but family wasn't, it seemed.

While she was running a glass of water, Anna Catherine came downstairs and into the kitchen. If the old house hadn't creaked with her every step, Molly might not have heard her in her soft leather slippers.

Anna Catherine read the note.

"Oh, did we have guests? I never heard. Wasn't Nora here either? Why isn't she here now?" came as a querulous demand. It appeared that Anna Catherine must know Nora's whereabouts at all times.

"We were walking. She hasn't come back yet." Molly concentrated on sipping the cool water. Anna Catherine was lying about hearing the visitors. She gave herself away when she looked in the refrigerator at the casseroles before she read the note Molly had put back on the table. "Did you rest?"

"I can go away into my mind without sleeping. It rests me." Anna Catherine slid the dried-out sandwiches into a plastic bucket. "If you'll move away from there, I'll put these dishes in the dishwasher. We conserve water by washing up only once a day."

Nora came back, and again Molly felt the wordless connection between the women. It lasted all during dinner, one of the casseroles, chicken and rice. A salad from Nora's garden.

In years gone by Molly would have been sick with jealousy over someone else's being so close to *her* Anna Catherine. Now she felt only relief that they weren't trying to draw her into their circle.

Even before the barely touched food was cleared, Nora announced she was going to bed. She directed Molly to the right front bedroom with the bathroom just down the hall.

When she'd freshened up earlier, Molly had wondered if the first floor bathroom was the only one in the house. If there was anything she dreaded, it was going around in a strange house at night.

Once the kitchen was cleaned up, she went out to get her luggage. She took the cell phone out of her handbag.

"I'm going to give Anson a call." Anna Catherine appeared ready to act as an audience of one. "He should know about Jake."

"Everyone should know about Jake. And don't you feel silly standing around talking into your hand? Where's the dignity in that, little Molly?" On that tart note Anna Catherine marched into the narrow hall and up the stairs.

Little Molly? What happened to darling Moira? she wondered in painful disbelief.

Anson's offer to come there whatever Nora's wishes were warmed Molly like nothing else could. She asked him instead to dissuade any of the family who might contact him about coming. Not just because Nora wanted it, but because of the very atmosphere. Molly wasn't sure how long she could stand it herself.

Since she didn't belong at the inquest, Molly was left to wander as she pleased. Feeling like a naughty child, she meandered through the house, downstairs and up. She didn't go into the bedrooms, just looked from the doorway.

Anna Catherine had the best room in the house, and Nora and Jake had separate rooms. Hers was crowded with bright craft items. Only the row of bright posters of California scenery around the walls softened his austere military furnishings. As far as Molly could recall, he'd never been in the service.

When the women returned, she was sitting on a bench against a tree. Anna Catherine went into the house without speaking. Nora, in a somber brown pantsuit, came to sit on the bench. After a lengthy silence she said without looking at Molly, "They called it a freak accident. Not those words exactly, but it's what they meant."

"Isn't that what you expected them to say?"

"Yes, I guess. That way it's over. It's just that the troopers were down there for so long. And they had so many questions for us and the Miklos boy. Poor boy, he was in such a state. He was saying someone Jake's age shouldn't be climbing around on those beams anyhow. Jake would hate to hear that."

At a loss, Molly remained silent. Nora sighed and stood up to walk back to the house. Even though she couldn't see above the heels, Molly knew Nora wore glove-leather boots.

Nora paused to gaze off toward the dairy farm. "I wish you could take her with you. But then I'd be alone here. I can't have that either, can I? I've never been alone anywhere. No one thought I had the sense."

It was for that reason Molly didn't snatch her belongings to rush headlong back to safe and sane Anson. Then she wondered why she'd put it exactly that way. Safe and sane?

It had been during a light breakfast of toast and coffee that Anna Catherine had said with such yearning in her voice, "Oh, we used to be so busy, doing things and seeing people."

"And now we don't, do we?" Nora said sharply.

How could Anna Catherine have gone from being a leader in any society where she lived to a near recluse? Whatever Nora had said about Admiral Kingsley, there had to be something that kept the local people from coming, especially at such a sad time. Where were the comforters, the offers of help and sustenance? Nora walked down to the mailbox to bring back a number of sympathy cards, but no people came,

The family-only graveside service didn't come off as planned. People from all over came to form a ring at a respectful distance. Nora didn't appear to know they were there until the final amen. They gathered in then to escort the three women to a church basement and a bountiful lunch. They were the people who'd known Jake well enough to celebrate his life. Molly heard delightful stories that sounded like the boy she'd known as a child.

Anna Catherine flitted here and there in her flaring storm-gray dress, acting the hostess. From what Molly could see, she wasn't impressing anyone. Nora seemed not to notice.

The undertaker had sent a car to take them to the rural cemetery. One of the neighbors drove them home in a plush station wagon. From the sparse bits of conversation Molly surmised he was one of the Miklos sons. Alex. He was too old to be the boy Nora kept calling him.

At the house Nora and Anna Catherine went straight to their rooms. Still holding her handbag, Molly walked through the orchard to the brow of the hill. She turned a chair so she could see back along the path and got out her cell phone. She hoped Anson wouldn't have too many questions.

He'd apparently been waiting for her call.

"Are you ready to come home now? I mean there can't be much needs doing. At least by you."

"I haven't had much to do anyhow but listen. I'll save all that to tell you when I get home. I will give it another day. Nora acts in control, but there's something . . . she wants Anna Catherine to leave. At the same time she's afraid to stay on alone. It's not just this remote location either. I don't know . . ." Did she dare say Nora acted as though something were haunting her? It wouldn't take much to send her running back through her orchard to the woods beyond.

"Well, you set a time to leave and then leave. Tell them your husband is falling apart without you. No, that sounds too much like bragging, doesn't it? Especially to two widows."

"I'm afraid so." She was thinking what a beautiful word routine could be. "Keep me in your thoughts, Anson?"

"Always, you know that."

Laying the cell phone on the table, she kept her chair with the back toward the scenery. She could see some distance back along the path, should either of them decide to seek her out. There was an air about both of them, a strength almost physical. Like saying, "I'm much tougher than you are."

"Mrs. Thornby?" came from some distance to her left. One of the Miklos men stood there in jeans and workshirt. "Mrs. Thornby, do you mind talking to me a little? I'm Gil Miklos."

"Of course not. Come and sit down. What can I do for you?" How many times had she said that to her own children?

He pulled a chair back from the table and sat down. Close up, she saw he was in his thirties, her own Brent's age.

"You came later, after the accident, didn't you? Did they call you to come? I only ask because Nora didn't want to call anyone. Not even the police, but there was no getting around it." His eyes were somber, as if he couldn't decide how much he should say to a stranger. Especially one with family ties to the people he'd be talking about.

"My children believe I'm the best person in the world to trust with secrets. And I am," she assured him.

"There's no one over home I can talk to about it. They're all just glad it's over. The camcorders were only around for a day, but that was too much. Especially for my mother. Her English isn't all that good. And Jake was your cousin . . ." He seemed to realize he was meandering and straightened his shoulders with a jerk.

"Then, whatever it is, don't you think someone in the family should know?" When he still didn't speak, she added, "No matter who's involved. Think about Jake."

"The day it happened, I could swear that long before Nora came running for help one of them was down at the barn. They both said even before the inquest that they were busy somewhere else all morning. I nev-

er wanted to say anything in case I was wrong about the time. I didn't have my watch on anyhow if I *had* wanted to check." His hands, resting on his legs, shifted uneasily. "Their hair . . ."

"The difference in their clothes. And Anna Catherine is inches taller than Nora."

"I was cutting hay in our field and was moving to their side of the fence later on. I kept going away and coming back, you see. If it hadn't happened to Jake, I'd forget even seeing whoever I did see." He leaned forward, needing to prove his point. "Hay waving in the wind can throw off a person's perspective. And as I said, I was on the move."

"You don't honestly think that one of them . . ." Molly wanted to go away inside herself where she couldn't hear.

"Oh God no!" He reared back in his chair. "Neither of them could . . . I just wondered—if one of them found him earlier, before Nora came running for help, why wait? Why delay, and if you did, why would you get hysterical at that late date?"

"Where were you on the tractor when she did come?" Molly stole a glance at the path through the trees. Still empty.

"I stopped at the main barn for a drink of water. She ran into me there first, and the others came running. The police might not have stayed so long if she hadn't moved him. She said the blood on her hands got there when she tried to find out if he could still be helped."

"Oh." No one had mentioned blood on Nora's hands. It did seem reasonable, however, for her to check.

He stood up to leave. "I guess it is possible for the wind to dry the blood that fast, especially the way she was waving her hands around. Anyhow, the case is closed. Jake left, all right, but not for California the way he kept talking about. And life will go on, won't it?"

Before Molly could reply to that bit of philosophy, Gil Miklos was striding back to the dairy farm and the work that would be there whatever else went on around him.

The California posters on Jake's walls. The only ones she'd recognized were San Francisco Bay and Big Sur. Wonderful places for artists, she'd heard. Odd that neither Nora nor Anna Catherine had mentioned plans to move.

I need to be home. She needed to be away from there before she began to take what she'd just heard seriously. What had he really said, anyhow? Even he couldn't arrange the events of the day in a logical order.

Watching Nora dressed in her work clothes coming along the path, Molly made a decision she had no doubt would please her. When Nora turned slightly to be sure the chair was directly behind her, her ponytail swung over one shoulder and back. Seeing the phone, she gave Molly an expectant look.

"I called Anson to let him know I'll be on my way home. My own flowerbeds must be calling me."

"Yes, there's always the soil, isn't there?"

"Anna Catherine said you all had stopped going out socially, or having people here. I'd like to know why. She must miss seeing people," Molly said firmly.

"Jake used to enjoy the company of our neighbors, too. He said he needed their steadiness and simplicity. What they don't know about life . . . When she came, it seemed all right at first. It was Jake who noticed the change. She was treating people like she was Lady Bountiful and they were poor sharecroppers or something." Nora threw her hands out in exasperation. "Then she started wondering whether we needed Jake on the place. She argued that we didn't miss him when he traveled with one of his pieces. I needed him. I *need* him." Nora's face crumpled as she sobbed almost silently. She pressed both hands against her chest and sobbed. Even after the sobbing stopped, silent tears ran down to soak her shirt.

Molly, who'd embraced near strangers in sorrow, couldn't bring herself to go to her cousin's widow.

"Didn't I read that his latest mobile went to a building in San Francisco?" She hadn't read any such thing.

"In Oakland, actually. He always came *rushing* back from those trips." Nora gave her a smug look. "He said this place was the only real truth in the world. The rest was like a Hollywood set. Let's go have some tea and some of the cookies Rose Anderson sent out. You'll love them."

They were walking single-file between the sections of vegetable garden when Nora reached back to grasp Molly's forearm.

"Don't tell Anna Catherine a *thing* we said just now. She'll think I'm going through with Jake's plan to have her put away."

"If she's watching now, she'll surely think we stopped here to talk about her." Molly pried Nora's fingers off her arm and gave her a nudge. "Go."

Almost as if they'd prearranged it, Anna Catherine came out with the tea tray. Seated around the spool table, they both urged cookies on Molly. She took a raisin-filled one.

"Delicious." She smiled at them both and tried not to think about Mad Hatters and dormouses. Dormice?

"Molly says she has to get back to Anson. We're going to miss her, aren't we, Anna Catherine?"

"Oh, must you go so soon?" Anna Catherine came forward so suddenly Molly was relieved the table was in her way. "The three of us . . . imagine what lovely teaparties we could have."

With twin beacons of expectation shining on her Molly fully expected one of the women to ask, "Now, what shall we do about your husband?" Her hand shook so she nearly spilled her tea.

"Anson is arranging time off to meet me halfway at a Ramada Inn." She'd seen one somewhere along the way. "We'd like to have a few days,

just the two of us. Now that everything is finished and . . . I should be on my way."

The harmonious "oohs" of disappointment lacked conviction.

Clutching her handbag with the cell phone in it, Molly managed to stroll calmly into the house and up the stairs. Since she hadn't planned to stay so long, she hadn't brought much and had had to wash a few things. She collected still damp pieces of underwear from the bathroom and put them in a plastic bag in her suitcase. She would have liked to look a last time at Jake's room but didn't dare. She wouldn't be surprised to discover the women downstairs listening to her every footfall above them.

"Did you know she allowed Uncle Stuart to die?" Nora's voice from the doorway sent a layer of ice along Molly's skin.

"Uncle Stuart had cancer." Moving stiffly, she closed her suitcase, then the makeup case. "There aren't always choices with cancer. Or time, either."

"True, but she persuaded him not to have either chemo or radiation and kept him stuffed with pain pills. She needed him gone before the congressional investigations began."

"Oh, Nora, I'm just plain sick of all this business. Your stories, her stories. I'll be glad to hear the last of them." Molly picked up her luggage and handbag, wondering if she'd have to use them to push her way out.

Perhaps sensing something new in her, Nora stepped back.

Outside, Anna Catherine was drifting here and there under the fruit trees. She unbraided her hair as she went. Tilting her head back, she shook the tight waves loose in the breeze.

Molly waited until she was in her car and had pushed the button to lock the doors. Nora stood back, hands folded complacently at her waist.

"Did you and Jake get control of her money? Is that the reason she doesn't leave? Because she doesn't have the money to pay live-in help? Or private nursing care, should it come to that."

"As smart as she was, her business manager was smarter. He walked away with all of her money. Jake wanted her to sue. He kept at her all the time, just like he kept after me about . . . I wouldn't listen, and neither would she. A court case might bring the investigators running. Molly, have you ever stood outside on a peaceful winter night and listened to the wild, wild wind roaring high above you? And down below you feel safe because you know that particular wind can never make you cold, or knock you over?"

"I might have. Why?"

"That's my life here. Winds and storms can rage all around my little farm, but nothing will ever touch me here. Nothing will harm me unless I leave." Nora stood with her hands together at her waistline. Molly started the car. "You won't be back again, will you, chubby little Molly? That's what she calls you, you know. Always has."

"No, I won't be back. And I don't care what she calls me. Never did," Molly lied. "I will tell you this, Nora. If I don't hear that Anna Catherine died in her sleep, of natural causes, someone will be here, but it won't be me."

Molly backed around and drove down the dirt lane.

The last she saw of Nora, she was standing in the haze of dust, frozen in her pose of contented triumph.

"I never did think to ask Anna Catherine what she meant by reversing all those flag stamps. If they didn't mean love and she obviously means to stay here . . ."

Driving through Starkville, Molly thought about calling Anson to make the lie she'd told Nora into the truth. But why bother? She needed to be where she could stand surrounded by her own familiar things, not in some strange hotel room perfectly appointed though it might be.

Note to Our Readers: *If you have difficulty finding Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine at your preferred retailer, we want to help. First, let the store manager know that you want the store to carry this magazine. Then send us a letter or postcard mentioning AHMM and giving us the full name and address of the store. Write to us at: Dell Magazines, Dept. NS, 6 Prowitt St., Norwalk, CT 06855-1220.*

MYSTERY CLASSIC

THE DISGRACEFUL AFFAIR OF TURPENTINE JACKSON

Benjamin Capps

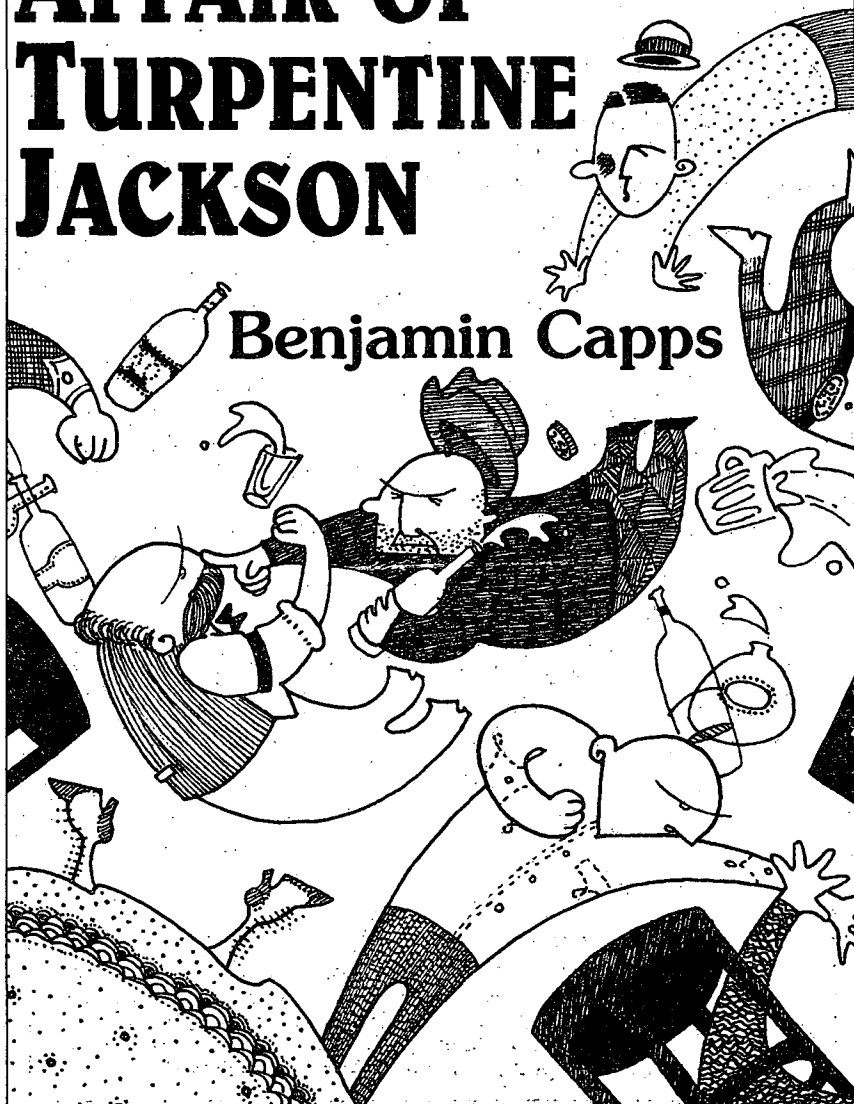


Illustration by Kelly Denato

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Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 5/01

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To the President of the Company and other officers, Dear Mr. Blackmoor:

First, they say it is a disgraceful affair, which I don't say is true, and hope it don't reflect on the good name of the Blackmoor Land and Cattle Company. As to giving the account, this is what I have to respectfully say for the record and to put it in black and white. I think Mr. Jackson's name is Henry, as I found it put down H. Jackson, but as you know he answers to the name of Turpentine. I want to apply and say that because I paid him twice I don't think it should be deducted from my salary. This is in the amount of sixty dollars cash money. I was told and instructed many times when out of contact with superior officers of the Company to use my own judgment, which I did to the best of my ability.

I had them put me down as Acting Foreman McWhirter, since I did not know if I have been promoted or not. Anyway, this here's a copy of the agreement or contract, so as you can understand what went on.

AGREEMENT

Whereas, it being the determination of the following various parties to settle certain serious grievances and alleged crimes and debts and damages once and for all, we the contracting parties hereto do agree and affirm:

That the party of the first part shall include the Honorable Mayor of the City of Dodge City, the Chief of Police of the City of Dodge City, the High Sheriff of Ford County, the aforesaid Sheriff also as a representative of the State of Kansas, the Commanding Officer of Fort Dodge, the President of the Chamber of Commerce of the City of Dodge City, and the Secretary of the Civic Improvement League of the City of Dodge City.

Further, that the party of the second part shall include, but not be limited to, Elmore McWhirter, Acting Foreman of the Blackmoor Land and Cattle Company, having authority over Turpentine Jackson, all owners and operators of said Cattle Company having authority over the employee Turpentine Jackson, and any keepers or guardians having influence or control over the aforesaid Turpentine Jackson.

Now whereas it is agreed that herein claims do not represent final judgments in either civil or criminal actions, the party of the first part does nevertheless present an itemized statement of account, to wit:

One bowl of chili at Welcome Tex Cafe. Not paid for	10
Defamatory and libelous statement of finding dog hair in chili at Welcome Tex Cafe	\$5.00
Fee for cleaning wall, Welcome Tex Cafe50

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Four drinks first-class whisky at Cowboy Oasis. Not paid for80
Libelous and defamatory statement calling first-class whisky at Cowboy Oasis epithet approx. "liquid mule waste." Damages	\$2.00
Grabbing money back improperly from Slick Hendricks, sporting man and part owner of Cowboy Oasis	\$7.00
Calling Slick Hendricks "crooked as rail fence" and also "crooked as dog's hind leg" at Cowboy Oasis. Damages to reputation of Slick Hendricks	\$5.00
Referring to occupation of Hog Nose Kate in public and making disparaging remarks about professional competence. Mental anguish and damage to reputation of Hog Nose Kate	\$1.00
One large mirror, Cowboy Oasis. Replacement cost	\$14.00
Failure to halt at first order by officer of law, to wit:	
City Marshal Owen Sims. Fine	\$3.00
Resisting arrest. Fine	\$3.00
Court costs, if tried, above two counts, \$1.00 per count	\$2.00
Damages to Marshal Sims' firearm	\$4.00
Sending Peewee Hawkins down in city well to retrieve firearm. Cost	\$1.00
Striking City Marshal in eye while in performance of his duty. Fine	\$3.00
One pound beefsteak	10
Four yards cotton bandage	20
Five drinks first-class whisky, Eddie's Emporium. Not paid for	\$1.00
Insulting and defamatory remarks about Eddie. Damages	\$4.00
Public statement that Mayor J. B. Krenshaw cheats at poker and is bigger crook than Slick Hendricks. Severe mental anguish and damage to reputation, also contempt of elected official	\$7.00
Calling New Orleans Rose epithet while she was verbally defending elected official. Also making lewd and suggestive references. Damage to reputation of New Orleans Rose	\$1.00
Breaking plate glass over large art picture of "Venus Bathing with Maidens," Eddie's Emporium. Cost	\$9.00
Drunk and disorderly, including statement that Turpentine Jackson can whip Mayor and two soldiers. Fine	\$3.00
Making reference to mother of Mayor. Damage to reputation and good name of mother of Mayor Krenshaw	\$7.00
Fighting on public streets, namely Front Street by Cattlemen's Hotel. Fine	\$3.00
One window, Cattlemen's Hotel. Cost	\$1.00

Assault and battery against two soldiers, to wit: one corporal and one private. Fine	\$3.00
Resisting arrest by Deputy Sheriff Perkins. Fine	\$3.00
Calling one corporal and one private "Yankee" plus epithet denying marriage of parents. Damage to reputations	\$2.00
Two gold teeth of Deputy Sheriff Perkins. \$4.00 per tooth	\$8.00
Three stitches in nose of aforesaid Perkins; seven stitches in mouth. Doctor's fee	\$2.00
Miscellaneous damage to signs of retail establishments along Front Street, including one barber pole ruined	\$1.50
Refusing to halt at request of three duly constituted officers of the law, to wit: Chief of Police Webbington, Sheriff Trueblood, and Constable Orr. Fine	\$3.00
Continuing to resist arrest, after warning. Fine	\$3.00
False, misleading, and defamatory remarks about aforesaid officers	\$4.50
Sheriff Trueblood's pocket watch. Damages	\$9.00
Constable Orr's spectacles. Damages	\$6.00
Chief Webbington's coat, sleeve torn and pocket ripped out. Damages	\$1.50
Damage to bench in front of City Jail	\$1.25
Miscellaneous derogatory and malicious statements about officials, employees, and citizens of the City of Dodge City, and also the State of Kansas, including U.S. Army personnel stationed therein	\$8.00
Damages inside City Jail, including, but not limited to, one sprung door, one mattress, and toilet facilities	\$24.00
Three counts of Contempt of Court before Justice of the Peace Adcock, \$3.00 per count	\$9.00
False and defamatory statement that said Turpentine Jackson can whip Justice of the Peace Adcock	\$2.50
One pound beefsteak	10
Six yards cotton bandage	30
GRAND TOTAL of damages, fines, costs, unpaid bills	\$179.35
Minus \$4.00 credited to said Jackson for one gold tooth discovered following morning in chamber pot, Miller's Boarding House, and returned to owner	\$4.00
BALANCE	\$175.35
Withdrawal of damage claim to reputation of Hog Nose Kate plus statement that Turpentine Jackson is a good man at heart.	

(Opinion only.) Also statement of Civic Improvement League that said Hog Nose Kate is not a nice person. (Opinion only.)

WITHDRAWAL OF CLAIM\$1.00

FINAL BALANCE\$174.35

Now, whereas, the representatives of Turpentine Jackson decline to submit an itemized account of any monies owing to him, the following statement by said Jackson is incorporated as part of the agreement herein: "I know [expletive] I had sixty dollars, two whole months' pay, when I came into this [four expletives] town. I sure didn't spend it, and I got only twenty-five [expletive] cents now."

Further, in answer to the above, Justice of the Peace Adcock swears and affirms that said Jackson had only twenty-five cents on him when he was admitted to the City Jail; and said Adcock says two residents of the City Jail, namely Joe Lefors and Charles Blankenship saw that the aforesaid Turpentine Jackson had only twenty-five cents, and he can prove it by the said witnesses.

Further, whereas Acting Foreman Elmore McWhirter of the Blackmoor Land and Cattle Company says he only wants to do a good turn and make peace between the parties involved, he, the aforesaid McWhirter, affirms that the Blackmoor Land and Cattle Company takes responsibility for acts of employees only when they are doing assigned duties for the said Company. And further he swears and affirms that he did pay Turpentine Jackson sixty dollars in cash money, and does not know whether Jackson got his money's worth in recreational benefits.

Therefore, whereas no full statement and itemized account is forthcoming from the party of the second part, it is agreed as follows, to wit: The aforesaid Jackson did enter the City Limits of the City of Dodge City with the said sixty dollars; and that subsequent to his entry the money was taken from him, legally or illegally, by persons unknown.

Furthermore, whereas various claims are made herein, but not admitted, if one principal condition shall be met, then all debts, damages, fines, and similar charges shall be canceled and forgiven. The principal condition being thus, namely, to wit: that the party of the second part, in particular Acting Foreman McWhirter, but including the owners and operators of the Blackmoor Land and Cattle Company and all persons who may have any control, authority, or influence over the aforesaid Jackson, either now or in the future, shall immediately and forthwith remove the said Jackson from the vicinity of the City of Dodge City. Further, they, the aforesaid party of the second part, shall prevent said Jackson from entering back into said City Limits at any time in the fu-

ture, either south of the tracks or north of the tracks, nor shall he be allowed to approach the military reservation of Fort Dodge or any personnel stationed thereon. Further they, the aforesaid party of the second part, shall prevent the said Jackson from entering Ford County; and further they shall prevent said Jackson from entering the State of Kansas.

And be it further agreed that Acting Foreman McWhirter and others, should Turpentine Jackson quit the employment of the Blackmoor Land and Cattle Company and thereby come out from under their control, authority, and influence, then Acting Foreman McWhirter and others, if they believe the said Jackson is heading for Kansas, shall notify the proper officials by telegram.

In witness whereof, we, the various parties of the various parts, do affix our signatures in good faith and in the presence of a Notary Public.

END OF AGREEMENT

Well, Mr. Blackmoor, that's the facts as requested, and I admit I signed the agreement for the Company, as I was told and instructed many times when out of contact with my superiors in the Company to use my own judgment, which I did to the best of my ability. I was also asked to make suggestions for the profit and good name of my employers whenever I deemed I ought to, so here goes: We could ship at Denison, Texas, or go plum past Dodge and up to Ogallala, Nebraska, next spring. Sir, there is a rough and rowdy element at Dodge City, which comes from the uneducated buffalo skinners and soldiers and teamsters and such types as gamblers, as well as some that is highly placed officials, and this is a bad influence on cowhands.

I hope this gives to you the explanation in black and white as requested, and respectfully say I don't think you should dock me the sixty dollars.

Yrs. Truly,
ELMORE MCWHIRTER
Acting Foreman

BOOKED & PRINTED

Mary Cannon



In *The Heat of Lies* (St. Martin's Minotaur, \$23.95), author Jonathan Stone sets two compelling, complex characters in a mesmerizing, deadly dance. Julian Palmer is driven and smart, and has already reached lieutenant in the small upstate New York police station where she works. When she was a rookie, she worked under Sheriff Winston "Bear" Edwards. A brilliant, intuitive investigator, Edwards ruled his small turf for decades with an iron fist, until Julian's testimony sent him to prison for murder in *The Cold Truth*. Now out of jail, Bear shows up in Julian's town just as a puzzling murder case falls into her lap. Seeking the truth at any cost, Julian pulls Edwards into her investigation. She knows he has his own agenda; she is certain he wants revenge against the protégée who robbed him of freedom, power, dignity, and a future. And sure enough, Bear is out there digging into an old secret in Julian's past. This one is almost impossible to put down.

Marty Burns had been a child television star, a grubby private eye, and an alcoholic jerk. Now he's a pretty generous and compassionate guy starring in a retro P.I. TV series—that is, when he's not poking around in the alleged suicide of a poker buddy in Jay Russell's *Greed & Stuff* (St. Martin's Minotaur, \$23.95). This whodunit has a string of hilarious one-liners, giving Burns a place next to Robert Crais' Elvis Cole and others of his ilk who are amusing without being annoying. As Marty looks into the sad life of Hall Emerson, a second-generation Hollywood scriptwriter, he learns that his friend was the son of a starlet who was murdered during production of a noir movie that, coincidentally, Hall was reportedly updating for a big-shot producer. Aside from an insider's look into new Hollywood, Russell offers some fascinating tidbits about old Hollywood, survival during the McCarthy era, film preservation, and lots more. Lively, snappy dialogue, an engaging

sleuth, and the Tinseltown setting raise this one above the crowd and promise a bright future for Russell and his hero, Marty.

Lisa Gardner, author of *The Perfect Husband* and *The Other Daughter*, has another winner in **The Third Victim** (Bantam, \$6.99). Police officer Rainie Conner lives in the quiet community of Bakersville, Oregon. Most folks have forgotten the tragedy of Rainie's past by now, and those who remember have always figured that if their respectable sheriff hired Rainie to be on his team, she was okay. A clever and twisted man, however, has put the town down for one of his deadly games, the most brilliant and devastating of his staged dramas—and he has cast Rainie in a starring role. This little town and its complacent, congenial residents are about to have their worst nightmares come true; both Rainie and her mentor must face ghosts from their past. Enter FBI profiler Pierce Quincy, who will need to unearth Rainie's secrets in order to save her—and Bakersville—from a psychopath. Gardner pits exceptional protagonists against an extraordinary villain; readers who don't worry about the likelihood of such folks existing will perch on the edge of their seats and enjoy the roller-coaster ride.

Anne Perry's new Thomas and Charlotte Pitt mystery, **The Whitechapel Conspiracy**, plays itself out around the grisly real-life Jack the Ripper murders (Ballantine, \$25). Thomas testifies against a well-liked, successful businessman who's accused of murdering his old friend. Even though no motive is ever discovered, Pitt's testimony is strong enough to send the accused to his death. For his pains, powerful members of The Circle go over Pitt's head, and he finds himself indefinitely assigned as an undercover agent in one of London's poorest neighborhoods. Meanwhile, with the help of the murdered man's widow, Charlotte begins to search for a motive for the crime in her belief that if she can prove Thomas was justified, his tormentors will be forced to let him return home to his family and to his old job at Scotland Yard. Turning her attention to what is undoubtedly the most famous case in this period of English history, Perry has chosen a strikingly different path from others who have written about it—and thus has come up with a surprisingly different solution to the Ripper enigma. And—need I say it?—as always, the story, told with period detail and strong emotional content, is played out in the hands of well-drawn characters.

Lynn Hightower's **The Debt Collector** (Delacorte, \$23.95) opens with a shocking crime: an entire family of five has been brutally attacked in their own home, and the only survivor is an infant who was shielded by the mother. Her dying words spoke of being helped by "the angel," but the investigation clearly leads to two cousins, the one controlled by his violent relative. As Cincinnati cop Sonora Blair digs deeper, she suspects another accomplice was there as well. Even after her partner is injured, she continues to pursue her intuition passionately—until, that is, she's pulled off the murders entirely. Hightower has cre-

ated a credible, tough protagonist in Sonora Blair, then assigned her to a case that has a tragic and very dark secret at its heart that threatens to destroy yet another family—her own—before it's over.

Here's a promising combo: lanky, languid Melrose Plant in a haunted house high atop a sea cliff in legendary Cornwall—and that's only for starters in Martha Grimes' **The Lamorna Wink** (Onyx, \$6.99). This time around Melrose is more than a sidekick—his Scotland Yard pal Richard Jury is on assignment in Northern Ireland, which leaves Melrose at loose ends. To relieve his boredom and to escape his horrid Aunt Agatha, Melrose impulsively escapes to Cornwall, where he rents a mansion that turns out to be the site where two children tragically drowned. Aunt Agatha soon follows him, alas, but the boredom issue evaporates when he becomes embroiled in the disappearance of a local woman and the murder of another. In this one, the crusty Inspector Brian Macalvie returns to help catch a cold and unremorseful killer.

Looking for a real change of pace? Try Michael Marshall Smith's fast, futuristic crime novel **Only Forward** (Bantam, \$6.50). Like the private eyes of yore, Stark is a loner with a strong survival sense, several unique talents, and an interesting and useful group of friends in several different neighborhoods. But it's the movers and shakers in the Center who, at the suggestion of the lovely Zenda, call in Stark when they learn that one of their top associates has been kidnapped. The answer lies in Jeamland, a place Stark and his childhood friend had discovered two decades earlier. And it is in this (literally) nightmarish world that Stark will have to face his deadliest enemy to date. This surreal tale requires some suspension of disbelief, but it is well worth the effort.

Another novel with a futuristic slant is Guy Holmes' first, **P.E.A.C.E.** (Simon & Schuster, \$23). The setting is New York City but with a difference: thousands of video cameras are mounted all over the city and in the subways, and a special troop of NYPD officers patrol with tranquilizers. The "Police Enforced Anti-Crime Environment" (P.E.A.C.E.) has nearly abolished crime, and P.E.A.C.E. officer Mac Wells is its biggest supporter. Then he accidentally shoots his own partner and boyhood friend, with consequences that will tear his loyalties apart—and make him the target of a deadly manhunt. Exciting chase sequences and imaginative technological props add a lot of tension to this thriller.

If you're looking for a fast-paced read to transport you down into espionage country, look no further than Francine Mathews' **The Cutout** (Bantam, \$23.95). Mathews has worked this gig in real life, apparently—she writes with such great authority that no reader will resist the pull into this spy tale. Caroline Carmichael and her late husband Eric both worked for the CIA, she as an analyst, he as an operative. His death while under cover with an elite, deadly group of terrorists has left her bereft. When he resurfaces on videotape as one of the band who kidnapped the first female U.S. vice president, Caroline is the first to agree

that she must go in and find him. Has he turned, or is he still in deep—very deep—cover? Globetrotting and the assorted gadgets and accessories of the spy trade are a bonus here. Mathews has written an edge-of-the-seat thriller with great characters, a super premise, and plenty of action of the physical sort as well as the intellectual swordplay one might expect of chess-playing spymasters. This one's a definite keeper.

In **Death Benefits** (Random House, \$24.95) Thomas Perry has teamed up a resourceful and amiable recent college grad and a grizzled, highly competent investigator with resounding success in a new twist on the odd-couple formula. After an all-too-brief fling with Ellen Snyder, another student in McClaren Life & Casualty's trainee program, John Walker has settled into the routine of his desk job as a data analyst in the home office when the mysterious Max Stillman shows up in their department. It is only after Stillman has drafted Walker as his sidekick that the young man learns of a recent multimillion dollar scam perpetrated against one of McClaren's branch offices, a fraud apparently carried out by Ellen. Throw in a spunky punk girl hacker and a fascinating bit of New England history, and you're off on a wild and entertaining caper in the company of an unlikely, irresistible duo. Please, Mr. Perry, bring Walker and Stillman back. Soon.

K. J. Erickson's first novel, **Third Person Singular** (St. Martin's Minotaur, \$24.95), introduces another engaging duo in a sure-footed investigation of a murdered teenager. Special Detective Marshall "Mars" Bahr and his computer-savvy sidekick Nellie are a team of two on the Minneapolis police force. When the body of a suburban girl is found on the banks of the Mississippi, Mars is called in to catch the killer quickly. Although he turns up some details about the victim, Mary Pat, he's unable to close the case. Erickson then switches point of view to a country house in England months later, where two Americans are guests at the homes of two brothers. Ann is engaged to Neville, who proved to be such stolid support when her sister was murdered back home. Bobby has been invited by the companionable Owen to get away for a weekend. Thrown together, the two Americans will make a shocking discovery, and then a conjectural leap that will take them to Mars Bahr and a witness he has tracked down. Likable characters, well-drawn settings, and a twist or two make this a promising debut.

THE STORY THAT WON

The December Mysterious Photograph contest was won by James Hagerty of Melbourne, Florida. Honorable mentions go to Frank Peirce of College Station, Texas; Madaline B. Tomlinson of Elverson, Pennsylvania; Mark Barstead of Toronto, Ontario, Canada; Sandi Stoyan of Mississauga, Ontario, Canada; Kraig Chandler of San-



derson, Texas; Kathleen Chencharik of South Royalston, Massachusetts; Benjamin H. Foreman of Harbor Oaks, Florida; J. M. Fraleigh of Mt. Prospect, Illinois; Debrah Lashley of Kingsport, Tennessee; Marilyn Swallow of Windthorst, Saskatchewan, Canada; and Ron Mayer of St. Thomas, Ontario, Canada.

Hulton Getty/Stone

ZEUS by James Hagerty

I'll settle in. Won't blink, won't move a feather. I'll stay here in the back seat and say nothing. I'll play it cool.

I don't mind being here in the car with my mistress, Leda. She oversaw my incubation and hatching, and she never treated me like an ugly duckling. I follow her everywhere. But twenty minutes ago I became an accessory to a crime.

I've heard Leda and her man speak of the Gotham goose caper. But that happened years ago. Even so, I should have seen this coming.

Just the other day her man said, "When that big swan follows you into the bank, everyone will be taken off guard. I'll hit the teller closest to the door for a fast getaway."

She responded with, "I'll make a fuss over Zeus to add to the confusion. Then I'll slip out and meet you later as planned. It worked with a goose. It should work with a swan."

Perhaps I shouldn't have followed her back to her car, but look at her, Spartan as always in her demeanor. Even in handcuffs, even as they broadcast an all-points bulletin on her man, she remains calm, cool, and collected.

I'm following her lead. Mum's the word. I'm mute. I have the right to remain silent. Even if they use force, Zeus is not a stool pigeon. And Zeus is not a goose. I follow my Leda everywhere.

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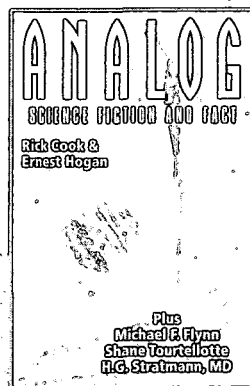
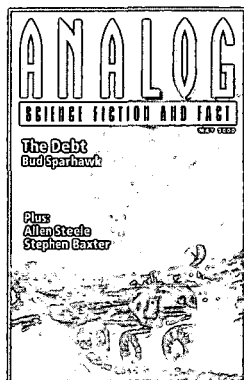
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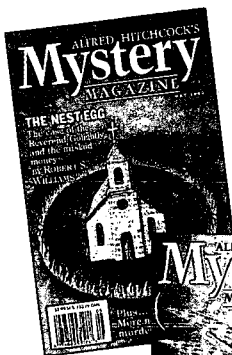
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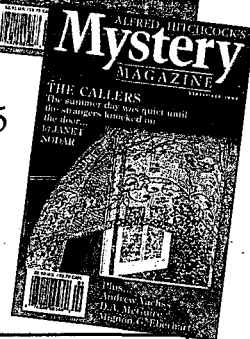
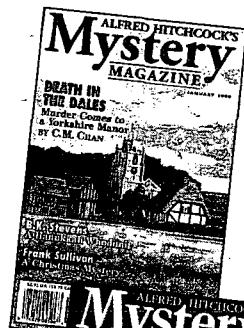
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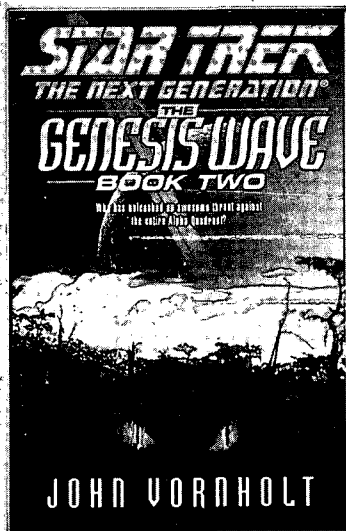
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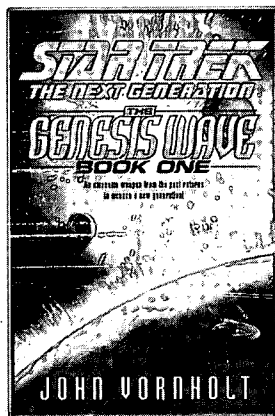
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